



## Curriculum Guide

Curriculum Guide prepared by Danny Bryck  
For the Huntington Theatre Company's  
Department of Education & Community Programs

## **How to Use This Guide**

*There are a number of ways to use this curriculum guide, depending upon your own curriculum and teaching style. On pages 4 to 5 is general background information – Characters, Synopsis, Objectives – and on page 6 is Audience Etiquette, to be used as preparation before your students have read or seen the play.*

*On pages 7 to 10 you will find Context and Themes, which will help students understand and appreciate the play. On pages 11 to 13 is the Arts Assessment, which consists of several interactive, hands-on activities in drama and design to inspire further consideration and exploration of the play and of theatre. All of these sections may be used before or after your students have read or seen the play.*

*On pages 14 to 21 are Supplementary Materials that will enhance your students' experience of the play. We have designed these materials to be versatile, so that you can use them selectively as you see fit. The first of these is the Mastery Assessment on page 14. This consists of several questions on the play, broken down by scene, which we have designed to ensure both that the students are doing the assigned reading, and that they are giving it thought and consideration. These questions are ideal for quizzes or homework assignments. The remaining Supplementary Materials begin on page 15, and include Critique, Important Quotes, Open Response and Writing, and Vocabulary.*

*On pages 22-26 are supplementary readings, including a note on the play by playwright Kirsten Greenidge, and the poem "Mending Wall," which is used in the play, along with commentary on the poem by the Huntington Theatre Company's Director of New Work Lisa Timmel.*

*On pages 27 to 29 are multiple Lesson Plans designed for 2-, 4-, and 6-day units. Please feel free to mix and match questions and exercises from different sections, and to use this curriculum guide in whatever way suits the needs of your class.*

## **Characters in *The Luck of the Irish***

**Nessa Charles:** Mid-twenties, African-American. Hannah's sister.

**Hannah Davis:** Early thirties, African-American. Nessa's sister.

**Mr. Donovan:** Mid-eighties, but spry. Irish-American.

**Joe:** Early thirties – Mr. Donovan earlier in his life.

**Patty Ann Donovan:** Early thirties, Irish-American. Joe's wife.

**Lucy Taylor:** Early thirties, African-American. Hannah and Nessa's mother.

**Rex Taylor:** Mid-thirties, African-American. Lucy's husband, and Hannah and Nessa's father.

**Rich Davis:** Mid-thirties, African-American. Hannah's husband.

**Miles:** Ten, Hannah and Rich's son.

**Mrs. Donovan:** Mid-eighties – Patty Ann later in life.

## **Synopsis**

It is the early 2000s, and Hannah and Rich live in a medium-sized suburban town on the outskirts of Boston, Massachusetts, which in the early twentieth century was predominantly Irish Catholic but now has become much more diverse. Hannah's parents, Rex and Lucy, obtained the house in the late 1950s, through a process known as "ghost buying." Because at the time the neighborhood was not tolerant enough for them to buy the house openly themselves, they paid a struggling Irish family, the Donovans, to act as their front. Now, fifty years later, the Irish couple wants "their" house back. The action of the play moves back and forth between the 50s and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, exploring the complex impact of racial integration in Boston and the universal longing for home.

## **Objectives**

Students will:

1. Learn the play's cultural and historical context.
2. Identify central themes in *The Luck of the Irish*, including:
  - a. Racism, Integration and Tolerance
  - b. Class vs. Race
  - c. Inheritance, Ownership and Home
3. Discuss how the play relates to their own experience and to American culture and society in general.
4. Participate in hands-on activities that enhance understanding of the play and of the production.
5. Increase their understanding of dramatic literature and theatre production, and critique the Huntington Theatre Company's production of the play.

## **Audience Etiquette**

*Because many students have not had the opportunity to view live theatre, we are including an audience etiquette section with each curriculum guide. Teachers, please spend time on this subject; it will enhance your students' experiences at the Huntington.*

1. How does one respond to a live performance of a play, as opposed to a film at a movie theater? What is the best way to view a live performance? For what should you look and listen?
2. What is the audience's role during a live performance? How do you think audience behavior can affect an actor's performance?
3. What do you know about the theatrical rehearsal process? Have you ever participated in one as an actor, singer, director, or technician?
4. How do costumes, set, lights, sound, and props enhance a theatre's production?

## Context

The United States of America was a segregated nation for much longer than it has been desegregated. Even after the **Civil War** and the **emancipation** of African-American slaves, the **Reconstruction Act of 1867** and the **15<sup>th</sup> Amendment** in 1870 granting African-Americans the right to vote, and the **Civil Rights Act of 1875** outlawing racial segregation in any public accommodations, America was still segregated and African-Americans were still, to put it lightly, second-class citizens. The Civil Rights Act of 1875 was rarely enforced, and instead the **Jim Crow laws**, a collection of local and state laws that institutionalized segregation and discrimination in various forms, were enacted and enforced from 1876 all the way to 1965. Racial prejudice, discrimination and violence remained the norm.

During the 1950s and 60s, the various campaigns of civil resistance that made up the **Civil Rights Movement** brought increased awareness of racial problems and multiple legislative victories for the rights of African-Americans, as well as racial tension and violence. In 1954, in the case of **Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka**, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in schools was unconstitutional, paving the way for further progress. The **Civil Rights Act of 1964** banned discrimination based on “race, color, religion, sex or national origin” in employment practices and public accommodations. It wasn’t until 1968 that discrimination specifically in the sale of homes was banned. African-American families who wanted to buy homes in white areas sometimes engaged in the practice of “ghost buying,” in which a white person acted as a front and bought the house for them.

Even after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the many positive steps that have been taken since that time, the U.S. remains a segregated nation in many ways. Chief among these is **residential segregation**, one of the most obvious examples of systemic racism today. Education is another area where segregation is keenly felt, in Boston especially. In 1974, the Federal District Court found the Boston Public Schools guilty of deliberate segregation of schools and ordered that students from predominantly white areas be bussed to schools with predominantly African-American student populations. This led to the **Boston Busing Crisis**, an outpouring of protest among white Bostonians leading to numerous incidents of racial violence. The crisis caused many white Bostonians to flee urban neighborhoods and relocate to the suburbs, and to send their children to private schools, thus increasing segregation of both schools and neighborhoods, as well as cutting the number of students in Boston Public Schools nearly in half. These events ultimately left the inner city poorer than before and triggered a surge in youth violence. Today, Boston schools remain among the most segregated in the country.

Boston is also a city with a high rate of **immigration**, contributing to demographic shifts in the city’s neighborhoods. Influxes of immigrants, as well as the relocation of upwardly mobile minority families into traditionally white neighborhoods cause many white families to relocate to increasingly suburban settings, a phenomenon known as “**white flight**.”

As previous waves of immigrants become more integrated into the mainstream culture and new waves of immigrants come in, perceptions of racial division shift along with neighborhood demographics. Originally settled by white Protestants, Boston received large numbers of Irish and Italian immigrants in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Boston still boasts the largest number of Irish-descended residents of any city in the U.S. today.

## **Themes**

### **• Racism, Integration and Tolerance**

Racism has many faces. In an increasingly integrated society, one encounters covert or subtle forms of racism as well as overt or more obvious racism. The United States prides itself on being a “melting pot,” a place where many different people come together to form a diverse and respectful society, but in practice, how does this work? Does it? Can it? Going beyond changes in the law, how can we see past our differences and live together successfully, on a more personal level?

\* What is your experience of the “melting pot?” Does the environment you’ve grown up in feel “integrated” to you? Is your neighborhood and school diverse or homogenous? How has this shaped your experience?

\* Have you ever experienced, witnessed, and/or been a perpetrator of either overt or covert racism? How rare or constant are incidents of racism in your life? How have you or others around you responded to such incidents?

\* In her description of the play’s setting, Greenidge writes:

“A mid medium sized suburban town on the outskirts of Boston, Massachusetts, which was formerly colonial and brimming with old New England stock, but by the very early twentieth century, predominantly Irish Catholic and proud to be so. By the time we meet this town, the Italians have arrived, followed by tiny bands of others throughout the twentieth century. By the early twenty first century it is not so much diverse as it is tolerant of those who are “other”.”

What do you think she means by “tolerant?” Is she saying tolerance is a good thing or a bad thing? What does tolerance mean to you?

\* In a note on the play, “Untold Stories” (attached at the end of this guide), Kirsten Greenidge writes,

“The more I wrote, the more “Boston” the play became, for the Boston I grew up in, and the Boston my parents and grandparents talked of, was not a melting pot. Or, if it was, someone long ago neglected to turn on the stove. Who your parents were predicted who you could become. Where you and these parents all lived predicted what other places you were or were not allowed to call home, or, in some instances, visit. I remember one St. Patrick’s Day asking my mother when were we heading to the parade “in Boston” — not knowing we were the only

group of people decidedly not considered Irish for the day and also not knowing what "Southie" meant — and she looked at me with both horror and sadness. "We can't go there," was all she said. In many ways *The Luck of the Irish* explores why, so far up above the Mason Dixon line, this might be."

Greenidge seems to be saying that Boston is more segregated and racist than one might assume. What do you think of this?

\*In her note on the play, Greenidge also talks about "the ambiguousness of being 'other' in a town that your people have called home for over half a century." What do you think she means by this? Can you relate this in any way to your own experience or to the history of your family?

Greenidge goes on to say:

"As I raise my daughter (and now son, too), it's becoming clear to me that the racially stratified world I was taught about from my family has changed. So the play also explores this as well: how do we live as neighbors when we may not have been taught how or expected to do so openly and with the compassion and understanding good neighbors are supposed to exercise."

Do you find there are differences between your perceptions of race relations and your parents'? Do you ever find yourself coming up against ideas about race that seem outdated?

#### • **Class vs. Race**

In the play, a contrast is drawn between an African-American family struggling against racial prejudices and a white, Irish Catholic family struggling economically. A frequent topic of debate in American society is whether race trumps class or class trumps race. In a society that often claims to be both post-racial and classless, how do we begin to compare and tease apart the two? Are being lower class and belonging to a racial minority comparable? How?

\*In your life, which is a more prominent issue, class or race? How do they intersect?

\*Do you think the interplay between race and class is more complex now than it was fifty or sixty years ago, or vice versa? Why?

\*Research affirmative action and entitlement programs (Welfare, Social Security). Do you believe these programs should exist? Is one more important than the other? Why or why not?

#### • **Inheritance, Ownership and Home**

In a country with such a complex and painful history and such a diverse population, it is often difficult to discuss or determine what belongs to whom and who deserves what. How do we determine fairness? What constitutes earning one's place, especially at the expense of someone else?

\* In an interview, director Melia Bensussen says of the play:

“It is also, for me, a play that speaks deeply to an issue I think many of us find familiar: needing to feel at home in the world, and feeling that one has earned that place and belongs in it. The characters are all a little displaced, either because of race or class or the simple fact that they don't fit solidly into the mainstream culture of their moment.”

What does home mean to you? In what ways do you feel displaced or experience being an “other” and in what ways do you experience privilege or being a part of the mainstream? How do these aspects of your identity interrelate?

What have you inherited from your parents, in terms of possessions and status in society but also in terms of ideas and values?

## Arts Assessment

### Drama

1. **Characterization:** Choose a character from *The Luck of the Irish* to portray, as if you were preparing for rehearsal. Consider your character's cultural background and how it influences his or her actions in the play. Then, as your character, answer the following questions:
  - a. What do I want? What is my overall objective?
  - b. What stands in the way of what I want? What or who are my obstacles in the way of achieving my objective? Is there anything inside me holding me back from what I want?
  - c. How, if at all, do I change during the course of the play? What is my journey or transformation? Does what I want change throughout the course of the play? How? What different tactics do I use throughout the play to achieve my objective?
  - d. What are my character's major qualities? Are there any contradictions inherent in my character? In what ways is my character similar or different to *me* as a person?
  
2. **Role Playing:** Improvise an important moment from *The Luck of the Irish*. Test the effects of making a change to the script at a crucial moment – as your character, make a different choice. How does this affect the outcome of the scene? How might it affect the outcome of the play? Why do you think the playwright make the choice she did, as opposed to the one you've made?
  - a. Improvise a scene that is implied in the play but is not actually portrayed.
  - b. Choose one character at a particularly defining moment in his or her life, prior to or subsequent to the events of *The Luck of the Irish*. On your own, create a monologue, or in pairs, create a dialogue, which portrays this defining moment in the character's life. How does the characters' choices and reaction to this fictional defining moment compare with the events in the play?
  - c. **Design:** Imagine that you are one of the designers for a production of *The Luck of the Irish*. How would you meet the play's various design challenges?
  - d. **Costume Design:** Imagine that you have been asked to design costumes for the play. For each scene, write down what each character is wearing. Then, draw the costumes, or provide pictures from magazines or the internet as a visual aid for your plan.

3. Set and Lighting Design: The action of *The Luck of the Irish* bounces back and forth in time, so one stage has to be an appropriate environment for all the events and both the time periods of the play. Imagine that you are the set and/or lighting designer, and write a detailed description of the play's set, or make a detailed drawing. How will the two settings occupy the same space? Will the set move? Will lighting convey changes in time and place? How will you incorporate the more expressionistic (i.e. non-realistic, abstract imagery) aspects of the play?
  - a. After attending the production, compare your design(s) with the Huntington's. How does each tell the story in a different way or highlight different aspects of the play?
4. **Group exercise: Theatre of the Oppressed is a system of techniques that uses theatrical exercises and performance as a way to analyze social hierarchy and oppression and to generate solutions and transform social relations creatively and collectively. It is interactive, so that the spectator becomes a "spect-actor." One key Theatre of the Oppressed exercise is "Columbian Hypnosis". Try it with your class.**
  - a. Divide the class into pairs. Each pair chooses a leader and a follower. The leader holds out his or her hand, palm forward, eight inches from the follower's face, with the fingertips even with the follower's forehead and the heel of the hand even with the chin. However the leader moves his or her hand, the follower must keep his or her face in the same spatial relationship to it. After a few minutes, leader and follower switch roles. Afterwards, discuss: Who preferred leading? Who preferred following? Why?
  - b. Now split the class into groups of three. Choose a leader and two followers. One follower follows the leader's right hand; the other follows his or her left. Discuss: How was this different? Was it more difficult? Why?
  - c. Now choose one group of three to be the center. Have each follower put out his or her hands and have four more followers follow their hands. Then have eight more followers follow those followers' hands, etc. As the leader in the middle moves, everyone must follow their leader and maintain responsibility for their followers. Discuss: How was this different? How did a slight movement in the center create a ripple effect that caused larger movements on the edges?
  - d. What does this exercise tell us about dynamics of power and oppression between individuals, among groups, and in organizations and societies? Use the exercise as a metaphor to discuss dynamics of power and oppression in the play.

## **Supplementary Materials**

- **Mastery Assessment**

1. At the top of the play, why is Hannah having a picnic?
2. What is the significance of the buttons?
3. When we first see them back in the 50s, and Joe and Patty Ann talk about “business sense,” what are they really talking about?
4. Why does it bother Hannah that Miles’ teachers call him “sport?”
5. What does Patty Ann mean by “the way things are supposed to be?”
6. What did Miles do that got him suspended from school? What is Hannah’s proposed solution?
7. What does Rich mean when he asks, “This is not Little Rock?”
8. Why doesn’t Patty Ann want Joe to go to University?
9. What does Rich mean by living “like those Montana people” and “in the Alamo?”
10. In the scene when Lucy and Rex are packing, they hear the girls breaking things upstairs. What is revealed later in the play about this moment?
11. What do Rich and Nessa do that they shouldn’t? Why?
12. What’s the significance of the fruitcake to Mrs. Donovan?
13. What happened when Joe went to negotiate with Rex, and what did he tell Patty Ann about it? When does he finally admit the truth?
14. What is the meaning of the word “bones” the way Mr. Donovan uses it?
15. How do the meaning of the words “fences” and “wall,” and of the phrase “we live here,” evolve over the course of the final scene?

## Critique

★ After attending the production of *The Luck of the Irish* at the Huntington Theatre Company, write a two-page review of the production. Try to critique the artistic and technical aspects of the play – the set, lighting, etc. – and the play in general. How well did the Huntington as a whole bring Greenidge’s play to life?

★ Group Project: Divide into two groups: those who felt that the Huntington’s production of *The Luck of the Irish* was a well-executed realization of the play, and those who did not. Stage a debate with the opposing side. If you are arguing against the Huntington’s production, give specific examples of how it fell short. If you are arguing in favor, give specific examples of how it moved you or improved your understanding of the play.

## Important Quotes

*Use the following quotations to discuss specific events or themes in The Luck of the Irish in context, or to discuss the universal ideas expressed by the quotations. You might use the quotations as springboards to short essays, or even as inspirations for role-playing, or as the first lines of letters, poems, or short stories. Develop any theme you choose.*

### Act One

- **NESSA:** Not everyone else just thinks about school lunches and violin lessons, some people think about how certain things can dig under your skin, into your bone, your marrow, and burrow there, settle there and live in there and make you want to *puke*.
- **MR. DONOVAN:** I remember when this was five cents. Five cents, you go down to the Balich Five and Ten and you got a whole bottle. Glass bottle. Ice cold and the sides would rub off on your fingers and make them wet. I do. I remember that. Balich Five and Ten and they were good people, the Balich’s. Good. Good. But.
- **RICH:** The American dollar makes you fit for this town, not the magic wand of the Donovans.
- **HANNAH:** My mother hates this house. She moved as far away from this house as Boston would allow. One bus, two trains, another bus. It’s almost a different country. Heart of Roxbury as if she didn’t grow up wearing penny loafers and getting her hair straightened every Saturday.
- **PATTY ANN:** They do exactly and that’s how I know we should ask for more. How’s it going to look? Us taking little handouts from people like the Taylor’s? Cause once they move in, Joe, the talk’s gonna be all about how we

got taken by a coupla—

**JOE:** How's it gonna look asking for *more* from people like the Taylor's? *That* would make us the laughing stock of St. Agnes.

• **LUCY:** Does it matter? This is Boston, of course it matters, it always matters.

• **REX:** --when every real estate office we walked into said “There? Oh, I’m afraid there’s just nothing available *there*, “Doctor” Taylor.

**LUCY:** Why do you keep speaking to me as if you kept me in a little glass case while you, Rex the great Negro doctor, went through this all alone? I was there. Everyone said no. I remember.

**REX:** John down at Atlantic Construction is not responsible for the slave trade, Lucy.

• **HANNAH:** Maybe it’d be easier to be mom, Auntie June. Teachers making you sit in the snow, surrounded by white snow because like any normal six year old you can’t keep still, white boys chasing you down the street cause they think you’re some thing to catch and release at their whim—those are real things. You can press your mind into them and say: these things *happened*, these things are warped and wrong but they *happened* and I can *feel* them.

## Act Two

• **HANNAH:** He can’t afford to have school problems. He is black and this is America and if he’s going to get anywhere he can’t afford to go around biting people or stuffing crayons down their throats. Those things *cost*. These people will lock him out and throw away the key on a kid like that. He should be better. He won’t make it if he isn’t better than this, Rich, he just won’t.

• **RICH:** We *live here*. You Taylor women have thick skulls and can’t accept the fact we *live here*. There’s no *fitting*. There’s no Shangri La where all the black people rejoice and sing because they can all share hair grease together or something.

• **NESSA:** My grandparents saw it as a step up. She saw it as a step into a trap.

• **PATTY ANN:** I’m just saying there is an *order* to things. You know there’s an order to things, or you wouldn’t have begged us—

**LUCY:** Who was begging? There was no—

**PATTY ANN:** There’s an order to things and you know and I know you and your girls are borrowing—

**LUCY:** Talk to—

**PATTY ANN:** And it makes me sick.

• **HANNAH:** Enough with the cool guys, I don’t want you to be a cool guy. I don’t want you to be these people’s cool guy pet token black basketball playing, football toting mascot—because that’s what is happening, that is what is—they call you sport and say you’re cool but they aren’t going to let you date their

daughters, they won't let you ten feet near their front gate. I don't want you at Simon Greeley's I want you to be a human being.

• **LUCY:** Something there is that shouldn't need a wall and I won't let them *push* me out. I will not. The Miss Brady's be damned.

• **REX:** Land of milk and honey my ass. You buy your way in. You buy your way in, Joe, and you hope for milk and honey even when it's salt and brine clogging in your throat, Joe. That's what clogs in your throat in this country when your luck runs out. Milk and honey my ass.

• **HANNAH:** It doesn't matter what is on that deed, or isn't on that deed...I'm buried neck deep like my mother all those years ago in the school yard. Something there is that wants it down but something bigger thinks every single wall in place, cemented in place, is the only order that should, that can work here. So I keep that order, but I'm so tired, Rich. Something there is that wants it down because I'm so tired.

## Open Response and Writing

1. *The Luck of the Irish* portrays various instances and forms of racism, in both time periods in which the action takes place. What sorts of racist opinions and actions does the play tell us are considered acceptable by mainstream society in the 1950s? What does it imply is still considered acceptable in the 2000s? What has changed? What hasn't? Can you think of any examples of prejudice or oppression that society condones today, at least to some extent, that you think will be considered totally unacceptable fifty years from now?
2. How would you define racism? Do some research on various definitions of racism. How does yours compare? According to your definition, which characters in the play do you believe are racist? Which characters in the play do you believe are not racist?
3. Pretend the disagreement over the ownership of the house is brought to court. Write an opening or closing statement for one of the sides, a cross examination in the form of a dialogue between an attorney and one of the characters, or a judge's decision.
4. What is your neighborhood like? Is it diverse? Homogenous? Does this affect you? How? Do you know your neighbors? What does your neighborhood mean to you?
5. Write about a time you were surprised by an incidence of unexpected prejudice and how you reacted.
6. Greenidge uses repetition of certain phrases and images throughout the play, some of which take on new or more developed meaning as the play progresses. Some examples include: "the bulbs were still cool," "four buttons," "king of his castle," etc. What are some other examples of this? Choose one and track its developing usage and meaning through the play. Why do you think Greenidge employs this device? Do you find it effective? How?
7. What does Rich mean about Hannah's "anxieties about things that are racial"? Do you agree with Rich or Hannah in this argument? Do you think he's ignoring the reality behind her anxieties? Do you think she's lumping unrelated problems together? What is the larger argument behind their quarrel? Explain your answer.
8. The particular cultural climate of Boston is often at issue in the play. What is your personal experience of Boston? Do you feel the culture of the area and of the people you interact with are liberal / conservative? Open-minded or close-minded? Multicultural or exclusive? Cite specific evidence of experience.
9. The characters in *The Luck of the Irish* by and large seem preoccupied with the interaction between their race and their socioeconomic status. For instance, Mrs. Donovan seems to feel it is unfair that a black family be better off than hers. While Hannah

and Rich, and Lucy and Rex, often discuss the particular issues of being upper-middle class and African-American. Rex says, “There’s nothing worse than Negroes with money.” What does wealth have to do with race? Why does this matter? What is the significance of this relationship in the play, and what have you observed about it in your own life or in current events?

10. Read this excerpt from a 2008 article in the Boston Globe entitled, “A place on stage for the quirky: Kirsten Greenidge aims to broaden what counts as black drama.”

SOMERVILLE - Boston-based playwright Kirsten Greenidge still bristles when anyone describes her work as “really imaginative.” And after several years of bringing her plays to stages across the country, it still stings, just a bit, to hear her characters labeled as strange, weird, or “a bunch of crazy black people,” she says, smiling while sipping a cup of coffee at the Diesel Cafe.

How do the characters in *The Luck of the Irish* strike you? Do they remind you of people you know, or do they seem out of the ordinary? Why do you think Greenidge might object to her work being described as “imaginative?” How can you related this to what she says in “Untold Stories,” her note on the play attached at the end of this guide?

11. Read the full text of the poem “Mending Wall” by Robert Frost, and the commentary by Lisa Timmel, Director of New Work at the Huntington Theatre Company, on the poem and its significance to the play. What is the meaning of this poem? Why does Greenidge use it as a recurring motif? How do Lucy and Joe manipulate the meaning of the words in the poem? Find another poem you think is relevant to *The Luck of the Irish* and write an analysis of its meaning and its relationship to the play.

## **Vocabulary**

*The following vocabulary list is taken from the text of the play.*

1. Ritalin
2. Deified
3. Blarney Stone
4. A & P
5. Pop Warner
6. Cliff Notes
7. Cul de Sac
8. Urban League
9. FTD
10. Green Grocer
11. Waterford Crystal
12. Rose Kennedy
13. “up and up”
14. “Bibsies,” “Mopsies,” and “Cottontails”
15. Emily Post
16. Indigenous
17. Metamucil
18. Man of Letters
19. Accomodationist
20. Chocolate City
21. Shangri La
22. Sammy Davis Jr.
23. The Sands
24. Jackie Kennedy
25. Aloof
26. Keats
27. Helter Skelter
28. Intimated
29. Ragamuffin

## UNTOLD STORIES: A NOTE FROM PLAYWRIGHT KIRSTEN GREENIDGE

"Kirsten Greenidge's compelling play tells an extremely personal story while revealing a hidden part of Boston's history. As we celebrate our history, we look to our future by producing new work by our talented Playwriting Fellows."

— Peter DuBois

I decided to become a playwright after seeing August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. I was twelve. I sat in the balcony of the Huntington during that school matinee performance, and looked down onto that proscenium stage and saw, for the first time, an African-American story that simultaneously challenged and affirmed what I knew about how black people fit into the cultural landscape that is America. Previously I had wanted to write novels. But I wasn't sure how to do that. In the fog that hung over my junior high school years, I had somehow concluded that in order to be published, a story could not include only black people unless they were Southern (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*) or had been hurt and damaged in some way (*To Kill a Mockingbird*), or existed as a joke (I had fallen utterly in love with Tennessee Williams and *A Streetcar Named Desire* by this point, but couldn't forgive or forget Blanche Dubois telling her sister they could play at one of them being "the boy" when Blanche explains she'll pour the drinks).

But these notions of how black characters fit into American literature melted quickly into the guilt that surrounds the Huntington's main stage when I sat in that theatre on a gray and rainy day quite some time ago. For the first time in my life I saw black people on stage who were there to tell stories. Complicated stories. Rhythmical stories. Stories that were at once proud, true, painful, and funny. The dilemma, to me, lay in how I could, like August Wilson, write these stories, too. It took six years and a college class by an actual living breathing female writer to reverse my thinking. What I learned in Darrah Cloud's class at Wesleyan (I took it as many times as I could) was that I am capable of fulfilling the ideas I had experienced in that school matinee in seventh grade. I am capable of creating black characters in a landscape that does not expect them, but certainly should contain them.

It's fitting that *The Luck of the Irish* has found itself at the Huntington. For although it is inherently a Boston story, it is also, in my thinking, cousin (perhaps distant, but that's okay as long as I'm at the dinner table somehow) to the works Mr. Wilson was able to develop here decades ago. When I set out to write *The Luck of the Irish*, I had two objectives: to collect the original commission check for it (from South Coast Repertory in Costa Mesa, California) quickly so I would not have to take any teaching jobs so soon after having my daughter, and to write a play about my grandmother, who had died about a month before. The more I wrote, the more "Boston" the play became, for the Boston I grew up in, and the Boston my parents and grandparents talked of, was not a melting pot. Or, if it was, someone long ago neglected to turn on the stove. Who your parents were predicted who you could become. Where you and these parents all lived predicted

what other places you were or were not allowed to call home, or, in some instances, visit. I remember one St. Patrick's Day asking my mother when were we heading to the parade "in Boston" — not knowing we were the only group of people decidedly not considered Irish for the day and also not knowing what "Southie" meant — and she looked at me with both horror and sadness. "We can't go there," was all she said. In many ways *The Luck of the Irish* explores why, so far up above the Mason Dixon line, this might be.

And so I began to explore not only my grandparents' move from the black South End to the suburbs, but also the ambiguousness of being "other" in a town that your people have called home for over half a century. As I raise my daughter (and now son, too), it's becoming clear to me that the racially stratified world I was taught about from my family has changed. So the play also explores this as well: how do we live as neighbors when we may not have been taught how or expected to do so openly and with the compassion and understanding good neighbors are supposed to exercise. The most I can say about this upcoming venture is that because of sitting in that balcony however many years ago, the Huntington has felt like home and working on *The Luck of the Irish* in that home feels just as true as those words that flew up and into me when I was twelve.

— *Kirsten Greenidge*

## **ON ROBERT FROST'S POEM "MENDING WALL" AND KIRSTEN GREENIDGE'S PLAY *THE LUCK OF THE IRISH***

Hannah, the central character in Kirsten Greenidge's new play *The Luck of the Irish*, lives in a suburb north of Boston in the house her grandparent's bought. It's a good neighborhood with good schools. Hannah's right to live in the house is challenged and she becomes a little bit obsessed with notions of belonging and with Robert Frost's iconic poem, "Mending Wall."



***New kids in the Neighborhood*  
by Norman Rockwell, 1967**

Over the 45 deceptively simple lines of Frost's poem, he questions the use of the wall he and his neighbor repair each year. Every spring they "meet to walk the line/And set the wall between us once again. We keep the wall between us as we go." Unwilling to question the status quo, his neighbor simply asserts, "Good fences make good neighbors." The poem makes a gentle and quiet argument against building and rebuilding walls, especially since nature and hunters seem so badly to want them down. He cites the cost of rebuilding the wall: "We wear our fingers rough with handling them."

*The Luck of the Irish* works similarly to the poem, accumulatively. Both look at one moment and see it as a result of many years of choices. And just as a dry stone wall is built stone by stone, layered one on top of the other, the play and poem build their arguments by layering digressive images one over the other. In the poem, Frost is defeated by the neighbor's unwillingness to "go behind his father's saying," but in the play Hannah has to breach the wall she has built around herself.

—Lisa Timmel

## MENDING WALL

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:  
I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,  
But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go.  
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.  
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
He is all pine and I am apple-orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.  
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbors."  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.  
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down!" I could say "Elves" to him,  
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there,  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top  
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors."

*-Robert Frost*

## **Lesson Plans**

*Choose activities that are appropriate for your class. All assignments are, of course, only suggestions. Only a teacher knows his or her class well enough to determine the level and depth to which a piece of literature can be studied.*

- **Two Day Lesson Plan**

*This plan introduces students to the context and major themes of the production.*

- Day One – Introducing the Play
  1. Please review *Audience Etiquette* with your class.
  2. Read a *Synopsis* of this play. Discuss the play's *Context* and one or more items from the *Themes* section.
  3. If time allows, discuss other works with similar themes that the students have already studied.
- Day Two – The Production

- **Four Day Lesson Plan**

*This plan introduces students to the production and then, after viewing the performance, asks them to think critically about what they have seen. Includes time for class discussion and individual assessment.*

- Day One – Introducing the Play
  1. Same as above; complete before seeing the production. Remember to review *Audience Etiquette*.
  2. Distribute the *Vocabulary* sheet, and tell students that several of these terms will appear on the test. And/or hand out the *Context* section and use bolded items for the test.
- Day Two – The Production
- Day Three – Follow-up Discussion
  1. Answer any questions students may have about the production.
  2. Discuss the *Themes* in more detail.
  3. Homework: Students should prepare for a test on the material, which will include vocabulary, quotes, mastery assessment questions, and an open-ended question. (And/or use bolded items from the *Context* section.)

- Day Four - Test
  1. Individual Assessment: Have students define several words from *Vocabulary*. Choose three or four of the *Important Quotes*, and have students identify their speaker and their significance in the play. Choose three or four of the *Mastery Assessment* questions. Choose three prompts from *Open Response and Writing*, and have students respond to one in a well-reasoned, thesis-driven essay. (And/or use bolded items from the *Context* section.)
  2. Homework: Have students complete a two-page, double-spaced response to one of the *Open Response and Writing* prompts that did not appear on the test.

- **Six Day Lesson Plan**

*This plan completely integrates The Luck of the Irish into your curriculum. Within six school days, you can introduce the play, assign reading and vocabulary, and assess your students individually and in groups. Ideally, students will view the play after completing the Mastery Assessment questions.*

- Day One – Introducing the Play
  1. Same as above.
  2. Homework: Read Act One of the play and answer the corresponding *Mastery Assessment* questions. Or, tell students they do not have to write out the answers to the questions, but there may be a quiz. Distribute the *Vocabulary* sheet and tell students that several of these words will appear on the quiz.
- Day Two – Act One
  1. Address any questions that the students may have on the reading or the *Mastery Assessment*.
  2. Discuss Act One, using prompts from the *Themes* section. Also discuss the *Context*.
  3. Homework: Read Act Two of the play and answer the corresponding *Mastery Assessment* questions. Or, again, tell students they do not have to write out the answers to the questions, but there may be a quiz.
- Day Three – Act Two
  1. Again, please review *Audience Etiquette* with your class.
  2. If you like, give students a quiz, using questions from *Mastery Assessment*, or invent your own.
  3. Address any questions that the students may have on the

reading or the *Mastery Assessment*.

4. Discuss Act Two, using prompts from the *Themes* section.

- Day Four – The Production

- Day Five – Group Work

1. Ask if students have any questions about the production.

2. Break students into groups, and have them complete any of the activities from the *Arts Assessment*. We highly suggest the “Theatre of the Oppressed” activity.

3. Homework: Students should study for a test the following day, which will include vocabulary, quotes, and an open-ended question. And/or hand out the *Context* section and use bolded items for the test.

- Day Six – Test

1. Individual Assessment: Have students define several words from *Vocabulary*. Choose five of the *Important Quotes*, and have students identify their speaker and their significance in the play. Choose three prompts from *Open Response and Writing*, and have students respond to one or two in a well-reasoned, thesis-driven essay. (And/or use bolded items from the *Context* section.)

2. Homework: Have students complete a two page, double-spaced response to one of the *Open Response and Writing* prompts that did not appear on the test. Or, assign them to write a *Critique* of the production.