TEACHER LITERARY AND CURRICULUM GUIDE

FALSETTOS

Music and Lyrics By William Finn
Book By William Finn and James Lapine
Directed by Daniel Goldstein

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Marvin wants to tell the truth, no matter what the cost. After years of marriage and fatherhood, he informs his wife Trina and son Jason that he intends to pursue a homosexual relationship with Whizzer. To complicate matters, Marvin’s psychiatrist, Mendel, falls in love with Trina, and his son threatens to call off his bar mitzvah. For many families, these events might mark the beginning of a breakdown. But whether it’s preparing kosher food with the lesbian neighbors next door, or confronting the issue of AIDS, Marvin asks everyone to love each other and to be a happy family.

OBJECTIVES
Students will:

1. Identify key issues in *Falsettos* including:
   - acceptance and tolerance
   - family love
   - forgiveness and reconciliation

2. Relate themes and issues in *Falsettos* to their own lives.

3. Analyze the themes and issues within the geographical, historical, and social context of the play.

4. Participate in hands-on activities that enhance understanding of the production.

5. Evaluate the Huntington Theatre Company’s production of *Falsettos*. 
RELATED WORKS AND TEACHER RESOURCES

Related Works

You might explore other works by William Finn, such as:
In Trousers (1987)
March of the Falsettos (1981)
Falsettoland (1990)
A New Brain (1998)

You might also explore the following books, plays, websites and films as supplements to this literary and curriculum guide.

Books

Plays
Bent (1979) by Martin Sherman
Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955) by Tennessee Williams
The Normal Heart (1984) by Larry Kramer

Websites
www.falsettos.net
(Information about Falsettos and William Finn)

www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/albm62.html
(Information about Falsettos and William Finn)

www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content4/adolescents.and.AIDS.html
(Information about talking to adolescents about AIDS)

Films
Angels in America (2003), directed by Mike Nichols, with Al Pacino.

The Birdcage (1996), directed by Mike Nichols, with Robin Williams.

Philadelphia (1993), directed by Jonathan Demme, with Tom Hanks.
PREPARATION FOR *FALSETTOS*

WILLIAM FINN:

As an overview, read aloud “The Irrepressible Finn: Navigating the Ups & Downs of Life and Theatre” (P.X.). In groups, ask students to connect what they know about the play with the playwright’s life. How did his personal experiences help to shape his professional life? What questions motivated him to write *Falsettos*? What does Finn seem most passionate about? Ask students to look also at “A Writer and His Characters: Evolution of a Musical” (P.X) for additional information about the playwright and his writing style. Instruct students to write a paragraph about what interests them most about Finn – his life, and his work. Topics may include, but are not limited to:

1. the birth of *Falsettos*
2. Finn’s congenital brain defect
3. the failure of *Romance in Hard Times*
4. Finn’s collaboration with James Lapine

Ask students to share their paragraphs with the class. Create a list of themes and main ideas emerging from their work.

JUDAISM: TRADITION AND RELIGION

The preparation for Jason’s bar mitzvah is symbolic of his struggles in childhood. Both Marvin and Trina love their son and want to guide him into adulthood, but ultimately he must make the decision about the person he will become. According to the Jewish religion, boys “come of age” at thirteen (and girls, in some traditions, as early as twelve years old). They often read from the Torah as part of the bar mitzvah ceremony. The Jewish tradition plays an important role in the action of the play as it unfolds. In order to better understand *Falsettos*, the following terms and expressions are explained below:

**Schmaltz** – Informal.
- Excessively sentimental art or music.
- Maudlin sentimentality.
- Liquid fat.

**Canadelach** – Matzoh balls (in soup!)

**Knishes** – A pastry consisting of a piece of dough that encloses a filling of seasoned mashed potatoes. It is similar to a mashed potato pie. When sold by the street corner vendors in New York City, they are fried and made into a square shape. The baked ones are usually round, and are often homemade or from knish bakeries.

**Gefilte Fishes** – A white fish mush, formed in the shape of a very small football; usually eaten during Passover (Pesach) with horseradish. Many people believe that it looks unappetizing and is an acquired taste.
Menorah – Holds the candles used in the celebration of Hanukkah. Eight candles burn for the eight days the oil lasted in the desecrated Temple.

Kosher – Eating, serving or preparing foods in accordance with Jewish dietary laws. (Often used as a slang word, meaning “legitimate.”)

THE AIDS CRISIS

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) may have once been characterized as a “problem” for the homosexual community. But in this country, as is the case across the world, the AIDS crisis is changing the lives of women in “monogamous” relationships, heterosexual teenagers, and unknowing children. The devastation of this disease knows no bounds. A recent United Nations (UN) study claims that five million people were diagnosed as HIV-positive during 2003 – the most new cases ever reported in one year. And according to National Public Radio (NPR), the most vulnerable group appears to be women, especially black women who account for two-thirds of all new HIV diagnoses among their gender. Given the enormity of the AIDS epidemic, what responsibility does our government, the UN and other countries around the world have to fighting the spread of this deadly disease? What policies would help strengthen education and prevention efforts? Among young people in the United States who have received AIDS awareness information, do you think their behavior (sexual or drug-related) is modified to reduce the risk of contracting this disease?

KEY ISSUES

ACCEPTANCE & TOLERANCE

The purpose of intolerance is often simply to unite the intolerant as a distinct group. Our society is full of ways for people to stick with their “own kind.” But do the benefits of this behavior outweigh the advantages of more inclusive practices? In Robert Frost’s poem *Mending Wall* he writes, “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out.” Finn answers that question in *Falsettos* by presenting his audience with a family that many in our society would reject as unfamiliar or strange. As the play unfolds, it becomes clear that the struggles and joys of this nontraditional family have much, if not everything, in common with those of traditional families.

Ask students to list examples of what they believe to be society’s ways of excluding or “walling in or walling out” people. Ask them to consider examples of where intolerance that limits the interaction of people with varying religious backgrounds, ethnicities, sexual orientation, physical and mental abilities, and social classes can be found. List their examples on the board. In groups, write short scenes that depict an intolerant situation. Cast these scenes and act them in class.
FAMILY LOVE

Marvin wants a loving family – but not the kind of family that is regularly portrayed in television sitcoms or comic strips. He wants his wife, son, male lover, the family psychiatrist, and his lesbian neighbors to be a family unit. Our “traditional” concept of family tends to be driven more by genetic relationships than by emotional connections; only the relationship of the marriage of the mother and father is idealized as resting on love alone. *Falsettos*, however, implies that what makes a family is simply people who love each other. As Finn suggests, “family is who’s there for you when you need them.” Love in families is often characterized by affection and unselfishness – the ability to put the needs of a child or spouse first, to sacrifice or labor in an effort to make life better for those you care about. But mostly love is the joy that is felt when time is spent together. This joy is not limited to those who share a bloodline.

Have students create a poster of their own family tree. Consider the traditional, non-traditional and extended family members that may be included. Remember a family tree does not (necessarily) show your ancestral heritage only, but depicts the “family” of those for whom you care the most.

FORGIVENESS & RECONCILIATION

The characters in *Falsettos* hurt each other, and they suffer because of these offenses. But this suffering does not result in a permanent fracture of their family. Their ability to forgive offers them the hope of reconciliation. Most of us are not as forgiving as the characters in *Falsettos*. Although we may forgive others freely for minor mistakes, we believe that certain wrongs are unforgivable. For instance, few would have blamed Trina if she had never spoken with Marvin again after he left her for another man. But Finn suggests that with a shared commitment to forgiveness and reconciliation, even the most hurtful transgression can be overcome. Forgiveness even frees Trina and Whizzer to trust and love again.

Ask students to define the word *reconciliation* and to make a list of what they consider to be minor mistakes that could hurt their parents. Are there unforgivable wrongs that could also occur? Ask them to interview their parents and compile another list of what parents might believe to be major or minor mistakes. Have them compare and contrast the lists. How are they similar? How are they different? Are the two generations tolerant of each other’s differences? Can parents and children still express love, respect, hope and optimism for the future despite these differences?
FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

1. Musical theatre is often defined as having the following components: the book (or libretto), that includes the dialogue, plot and major themes of the piece, the score or the music, and lyrics to the songs, which the characters sing. List three contemporary films or television shows that you believe could be categorized as a “musical.” How is a musical different from a non-musical play, comedy or drama? Musical theatre stars are often called a “triple-threat,” meaning that they can sing, dance and act. List three present-day actors who could be considered a “triple-threat.”

2. The dramaturg serves as a resource for directors, actors and the company producing a play. The dramaturg provides important background information and other details about the play, which are useful to the artists interpreting the story, be they designers or understudies. If you were assigned to be the dramaturg for a production of Falsettos, what research and visual stimulation would you provide for the director and actors at the first rehearsal?

3. During February of 2005, researchers announced that they had found a drug resistant strain of the HIV virus. Patients with this strain of the virus are nearly impossible to treat, and move from an HIV-positive status to having full-blown AIDS within two to three months of contracting the disease (in other strains of the illness it can take closer to ten years to develop AIDS). Research the AIDS epidemic and how our understanding of the disease has changed over the last twenty years. What do we know now about AIDS patients that we did not know when the disease was discovered in 1981? Who is most at risk for contracting HIV? How can you protect yourself from AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases?

4. Religion plays an important role in the lives of the Falsettos characters. How would the musical be different if Marvin and Trina were not Jewish? Can a person be Jewish without practicing the religion? What do you know about Judaism? How is it similar to and different from other major world religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, etc.) Does the Jewish religion have a specific teaching about homosexuality? How do young people in other religions enter adulthood, as Jason comes of age through his bar mitzvah? At the end of the play, do you think Jason has become a man?
MASTERY ASSESSMENT

ACT ONE – “MARCH OF THE FALSETTOS”

1. Why did William Finn begin the show with “Four Jews in a Room Bitching?” Describe the tone that is set by this opening number.

2. What does Marvin want from life? Why will this be difficult to achieve?

3. Who is Mendel and what is his relationship to Marvin? Why is Mendel meeting with Trina?

4. What does the song “Thrill of First Love” reveal about the dynamics of Whizzer and Marvin’s relationship? How do they treat each other?

5. Mendel asks questions about Trina during Marvin’s therapy session. Are these questions designed to help Marvin?

6. Describe Marvin’s relationship with Jason. What kinds of things do they do together? What fear does Jason have about his future because of his relationship with his father?

7. Why does Jason object to seeing a psychiatrist? What does he ask to do instead?

8. During the song “I’m Breaking Down,” how does Trina say she feels about Whizzer? For what reasons does she seem to be attracted to Mendel?

9. Jason finally agrees to see a psychiatrist. But under what condition is he willing to start therapy?

10. Jason is aware that Mendel has other reasons for coming to his house besides his therapy sessions. What is Jason asking when he questions Mendel about his “intentions” toward his mother?

11. Do you think Mendel’s marriage proposal is romantic and sincere? Support your answer with clues from the text.

12. What is Marvin’s reaction to Mendel’s marriage proposal? Does he approve of the relationship between Trina and Mendel?

13. Why is Whizzer unhappy with Marvin? What does their game of chess symbolize?

14. Why does Marvin hit Trina? What does this act of violence reveal about his character?
15. What has replaced “chess” as being the “most beautiful thing in the world” to Jason? Why is this significant?

ACT TWO – FALSETTOLAND

16. What kinds of people live in “Falsettoland”?

17. Marvin and Trina are preparing for Jason’s bar mitzvah. Who does Marvin want to cater the event, and what relationship do they have to him?

18. What distracts Jason during his baseball game? Why do you think Jason asked Whizzer to come see him play?

19. Based on their reaction at seeing each other, does it seem likely that Marvin and Whizzer will rekindle their relationship?

20. Do you think Mendel is a good psychiatrist? What is it about Whizzer that Mendel dislikes?

21. What kind of doctor is Charlotte? How does Cordelia feel about her partner’s work? How does she compare it to her own?

22. Why is Jason upset about the bar mitzvah planning? Do you think it is normal for a thirteen-year old to “hate” his or her parents?

23. What is happening to Dr. Charlotte’s patients? Why is she deeply concerned about the epidemic?

24. Whizzer collapses while playing with Marvin. Speculate as to what could be wrong with him.

25. What big decision do Trina and Marvin ask Jason to make? What is Jason’s reaction to their request?

26. Jason speaks with God for the first time. What does he ask for?

27. How does Whizzer face death? Is he scared? Angry? Relieved? What is his last hope?

28. What compromise is reached about Jason’s bar mitzvah? How is this an appropriate ending to the play?
OPEN RESPONSE AND WRITING

Instructions for students: Please answer the following as thoroughly as possible.
Remember to use topic sentences and examples from the text.

Instructions to the students: Please answer the following as thoroughly as possible in one well-planned and carefully written paragraph. Remember to use topic sentences and examples from the text.

1. What is Falsettos about? How might today’s young people relate to the story?

2. Explain the significance of the title Falsettos. According to William Finn, what is a “falsetto”?

3. What role does Judaism play in the key moments of the play, and how does this religion affect the course of the story?

4. Finn says that his play is “about life, not death.” Refute or support this claim.

5. The audience at a production of Falsettos might think “Marvin wants to have his cake and eat it, too.” Discuss how Marvin’s desires illustrate the meaning behind this cliché. Does anyone ever have cake and not eat it?

6. Finn’s Falsettos is a deeply personal work that not only became a successful musical but also started a “new movement towards the singer/songwriter model of musical theatre.” Why is it good advice to “write what you know”?

7. Consider the three romantic relationships in the play: Marvin and Whizzer, Trina and Mendel, and Dr. Charlotte and Cordelia. What is the major obstacle or conflict in each one? How does each couple show the qualities of love?
Writing Assignments

1. Finn said that his characters are outside the range of what is considered “normal.” What is “normal”? How does society view people and families that are not “normal”? Consider how being “normal” changes depending on ethnicity, social class, and culture. Do you think that Jason’s family situation would be considered less abnormal today than it was in 1979?

2. Use one of the following lines from *Falsettos* as a topic for a short essay:

   PASSION DIES.
   BUT I’D KILL FOR THAT THRILL OF FIRST LOVE.

   A HEALTHY FRUIT IS HEALTHY TILL IT ROTS.

   I ONLY WANT TO LOVE A MAN WHO CAN LOVE ME
   OR LIKE ME
   OR HELP ME.

   I’VE MADE MY CHOICE.
   BUT YOU CAN SING A DIFFERENT SONG.

   DON’T THINK OF A THING.
   KEEP YOUR HEAD IN THE BOX.

   AT LEAST DEATH MEANS
   I’LL NEVER BE SCARED ABOUT DYING AGAIN.

3. Debate after the outcome of the 2004 presidential election centered on the idea of moral values. What are these “values”? Is the opposition to homosexuality and gay marriage a “value”? Do you think Marvin is a moral person? How does Marvin/Finn want to redefine the notion of “family values”?

4. Portrayal of gays in contemporary film and television shows varies from victim to over-the-top comic relief. Choose a homosexual character in either a popular sitcom or movie that you feel is not based on stereotype, but is a three-dimensional person. Explain why this character is like someone you could meet in real life, with qualities that extend beyond the over-simplification of what it means to be “gay.”

5. Mendel plays an important role in the lives of Marvin, Trina and Jason. But do you think he has broken his Hippocratic oath? What ethical questions are raised by his relationship with Marvin and Trina? Do you feel that he makes choices that are in the best interest of his patients?
6. In *What Would I Do?* Finn writes, “Once I was told that all men get what they deserve.” Do you think this statement has truth to it? Why might someone think that Whizzer got what he deserved? Why might someone else think he did not?

7. Choose one of the main characters in *Falsettos*, and write a journal entry from the point of view of one of these characters, expanding on what we already know about them. Place them at key moment in the play, a time critical to propelling the action of the play forward.

8. Write a critical review of the Huntington Theatre Company’s production of *Falsettos* and submit it for publication in your school newspaper. Be sure to send the Huntington a copy!

MEDIA ASSESSMENT

*These questions and hands-on exercises are interactive challenges in Drama, Music, Dance, Visual Arts and Design that inspire further consideration or understanding of the play.*

Creating Characterization

Have each of your students choose a character from *Falsettos* to portray. As if they were preparing for the role in rehearsal, have them answer the following questions about their characters:

a. What do I want in the play? 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? Does what I want change throughout the course of the play? How?

c. Does my character change during the course of the play? What is my character’s journey or plot transformation?

d. What are the contradictions inherent in my character?

Role Playing/Improvisation

a. Ask students to improvise an important moment from *Falsettos*. Students should test the effects of changing something about the performance – tone of voice, a character trait, or a vital remark. How does such a change affect the selected moment? How does the pacing or posturing of an actor affect the comic timing of the piece? Is it possible that a change in the tone of voice can turn a serious moment into a humorous one?

b. Ask students to improvise a scene after the conclusion of the play. What happens to Marvin and Jason? Trina and Mendel? Dr. Charlotte and Cordelia? This
exercise will help students to understand that creating a work always involves an interrupted process or a decision to stop what could be endlessly revised.

c. Divide the students into three groups and assign each group to represent one scene or key moment the play. Students should create a tableau or stage picture that represents the characters during that moment of the play.

Acting

Ask students to choose one musical selection from *Falsettos* and write dialogue that captures the action of that song. Students should then prepare to act out their new scene. They should use props and costume pieces if possible to enhance the experience. Students should carefully consider their placement on stage, choreography and blocking (who moves where and when), gestures, vocal tone, and the intended emotional impact of the scene. If there is time, ask students to memorize the scene in which they will perform.

Visual Art

1. After reading *Falsettos*, ask students to create a symbolic piece that reflects the message of *Falsettos*, and encourage them to keep the key ideas of Family Love, Acceptance & Tolerance, and Forgiveness & Reconciliation in mind. Ask students to craft their work from the materials they find in their bags, lockers and in the classroom. After students have completed this task, they should display their “found art” on their desks. As if taking a tour of museum, students should circulate through the classroom, asking the artists questions about their work and how it relates to *Falsettos*.

2. Ask students to create a poster design for the Huntington Theatre Company’s production of *Falsettos* using the media with which they feel most comfortable (photography, paints, collage, etc.). Encourage students to consider texture and color when making decisions about how best to represent this play. Suggest to students that this poster will be used to advertise the production in and around the Boston area. How might you catch a prospective audience member’s eye? What images or pictures would be appropriate to use in this advertising campaign, symbols that reflect *Falsettos*? After students have completed their design, ask them to share their work with the class.

Music/Dance

Students should choose a musical selection from *Falsettos* to perform. Have students listen to the music from the show, and create original choreography for the song they choose. Allow time for students to talk about the process they used in creating, rehearsing, and performing their scene from *Falsettos*.

The Design Process

Students should research American clothing styles from the late 1970s and early 1980s, and create costume designs that are appropriate for a production of *Falsettos*. Encourage students to gather pictures and renderings from this time period, and to choose colors,
textures, and materials that reflect the trends, styles, and symbolism inherent in this musical. Students should also create a design concept for the set and props necessary in the show. Consider the director’s note at the beginning of the play, “All the furniture is on wheels. Locations change in the blink of an eye.” What challenges does the pace of the show create for set and costume designers? Students should be able to defend their choices and explain how each design reflects the historic and cultural context of the production.

LESSON PLANS

Teachers’ note: Choose activities that are appropriate for your classroom period. All assignments are suggestions. Only a teacher knows his or her class well enough to determine the level and depth to which any piece of literature may be examined.

ONE-DAY LESSON PLAN introduces students to the context and major themes of the production.

DAY ONE – Introducing the Play

1. Distribute Mastery Assessment (P. X) for Falsettos for students to read before, and to review again after attending the performance.  
   Optional: Distribute Vocabulary Handout and ask students to define each word. A vocabulary test could be administered after viewing the play.
2. Read the “Synopsis” (P.X) of Falsettos. Discuss other works students have studied with similar themes and issues.
3. Copy and distribute “The Irrepressible Finn: Navigating the Ups & Downs of Life and Theatre” in the literary guide (P.X.) In groups or individually, ask students to underline key information about the playwright and share their ideas with the class.
   Optional: To save time, narrate highlights for students.
4. If time allows, discuss further pages from the literary guide, including “A Writer and His Characters: Evolution of a Musical” (P.X).

FOUR-DAY LESSON PLAN introduces students to the production and then, after viewing the performance, asks them to think more critically about what they have seen. Includes time for class discussion and individual assessment.

DAY ONE – Introducing the Production

Same as Day One above; completed before seeing the production.

DAY TWO – The Production

Attend the performance at the Huntington Theatre Company.  
Homework: Students should answer the Mastery Assessment questions.
DAY THREE – Follow-up Discussion

Discuss Mastery Assessment answers in class.

DAY FOUR – Test

Individual Assessment: Choose either several questions from the Open Response Assessment or one question from Writing Assignments (P.X) for students to answer in one class period. 
Optional: Students may choose one of the For Further Exploration of Media Assessment tasks to complete for extra credit.

SEVEN-DAY LESSON PLAN completely integrates Falsettos into your schedule. Within seven school days, you can introduce the play, assign reading and vocabulary, and assess your students on both a group and individual level. Students will ideally view the play after completing Mastery Assessment questions.

DAY ONE – Introducing the play
Same as Day One above.
Optional: Distribute Vocabulary Handout due on Day Four.
Homework: Read Act One and answer corresponding Mastery Assessment Questions.

DAY TWO – Act One
Discuss Act One and answers to Mastery Assessment questions.
Homework: Read Act Two and answer corresponding Mastery Assessment questions.

DAY THREE – Act Two
Discuss the end of the play and answers to Mastery Assessment questions.

DAY FOUR – Attend Performance
Optional: Vocabulary Handout due!
Homework: Complete one For Further Exploration Activity.

DAY FIVE – Group Work
Using what they have learned through attendance at the performance and completion of the Mastery Assessment and For Further Exploration questions, ask students to create an original presentation about Falsettos. Projects should focus on a major theme or key idea presented in the show. Schedule library time for this period, if necessary.

DAY SIX – Presentations
Students will present their group projects to the class.
Homework: Students should prepare for the test on the following day.
DAY SEVEN – Test
Individual Assessment: Choose either several questions from the Open Response or one question from the Writing Assignments for students to answer in one class period.
Optional: Students may choose to complete one of the For Further Exploration or Media Assessment tasks for extra credit.
Handout 1
VOCABULARY IN *FALSETTOS*
Define the following terms

Lapel  Pagan
Dreck  Quandary
Alibi
Bourgeoisie
Chastity
Covet
Vicious
Concede
Smarmy
Convalescing
Neurotic
Parody
Ottoman
Exorbitant
Criterion
Ciao
Lust
Condescend
Consolidate
Latrine
Hors d’oeuvres
Appendicitis
Dirge
Exorcise
Apoplexy
Demeanor
Homely
Bereft
Phosphorescence
Uncouth
Impetus
Insomniac
Scrupulous
Fortissimo
Congregate
Hypochondriac
Voodoo
Copasetic
Morass
Invincible
Nouvelle
Below you will find objects, people and places related to *Falsettos*. Match the clue with the appropriate answer.

1. Knish  
2. James Lapine  
3. 1992  
4. Boston  
5. Tony Kushner  
6. drug cocktail  
7. score (in a musical)  
8. Kosher  
9. 1981  
10. Williamstown  
11. Tony  
12. book (in a musical)  
13. William Finn  
14. Human Immunodeficiency Virus

A. Birthplace of William Finn  
B. libretto  
C. slang word used to mean legitimate  
D. the virus that causes AIDS  
E. Stephen Sondheim and William Finn’s college town  
F. the year AIDS was discovered  
G. highest award given in theatre  
H. wrote “A New Brain”  
I. Potato pastry  
J. music  
K. medicine used to prolong the life of AIDS patients  
L. playwright who wrote *Angels in America*  
M. The year *Falsettos* made its Broadway debut  
N. Collaborated on *Falsettos* with Finn


(*Melissa, could you print the answers upside down, please?)