

BESSIE SMITH

Jean Donatto

Performance Grades 7-12

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Jean Donatto, an acclaimed actress, portrays Miss Bessie Smith "holding court" with students. Miss Smith presents the living conditions in the cities where she traveled and performed during her rise to stardom. The focus of this presentation is 1923-1925, considered the beginning and apex of Bessie Smith's career as a recording artist. Politics and the mood of post-World War I America form the foundation of the discussions as Miss Smith sings, chats, and answers questions about how it felt to be famous and black during the "Jazz Age."

TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills):

Grade	Theatre	Music	Social Studies	Lang. Arts	The Students Will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Relate theatre to life in particular times, places, and cultures. * Identify and apply appropriate audience behavior and concert etiquette at performances. * Examine music in relation to history, culture, and the world. * Analyze the contributions of people of various racial and ethnic groups to our national identity and recognize the political, social and economic contributions of women to American society. * Identify historical figures and their significance and accomplishments, and how they have changed communities past and present. * Explain reasons for increase in factories and urbanization. * Use the writing process to organize, write, and publish drafts. * Write literary texts to express their ideas and feelings about real or imagined people, events and ideas.
MS	2.4, 2.5	2.5, 2.6	7.12, 7.19, 7.20	7.14, 7.15	
	3.4, 3.5	3.5, 3.6	8.12, 8.23, 8.26, 8.27, 8.28	8.14, 8.15	
HS	I.4, I.5	I.5, I.6	WH.26, 27, 28	9.13, 9.14	
	II.4, II.5	II.5, II.6	USH.16,25, 27, 26	10.13, 10.14	
	III.4, III.5	III.5, III.6	GOV. 19	11.13, 11.14	
	IV.4, IV.5	IV.5, IV.6	WG.17	12.13, 12.14	

STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness):

<table border="1"> <tr> <td rowspan="2">Writing</td><td>Grades 7</td><td>Reporting Category 1</td></tr> <tr> <td>English I, II, III</td><td>Reporting Category 4</td></tr> <tr> <td rowspan="2">Social Studies</td><td>Grade 8</td><td>Reporting Category 1</td></tr> <tr> <td>US History</td><td>Reporting Category 1</td></tr> </table>	Writing	Grades 7	Reporting Category 1	English I, II, III	Reporting Category 4	Social Studies	Grade 8	Reporting Category 1	US History	Reporting Category 1	The Students Will: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Compose a variety of written texts with a clear central idea, coherent organization, sufficient development, and effective use of language and conventions. * Demonstrate an understanding of issues and events in U.S. history. 	
Writing		Grades 7	Reporting Category 1									
	English I, II, III	Reporting Category 4										
Social Studies	Grade 8	Reporting Category 1										
	US History	Reporting Category 1										

Academic Vocabulary:

Legacy	Anything handed down from an ancestor or other person.
Feminism	The principle that women should have political, economic and social rights equal to those of men.
Poverty	The condition or quality of being poor.
Indigence	The condition of being poor, needy, in poverty or destitute.
Compassion	Sorrow for the sufferings or trouble of another, accompanied by an urge to help; deep sympathy; pity.
Blues	A sad, melancholic style of music that was created by African Americans in the southern U.S. that often expresses feelings of sadness.
Segregation	The separation or isolation of a race, class or ethnic group by discriminatory means.
Jim Crow	Laws in the South that resulted in segregation of schools, public places, and public transportation. These laws also prevented African Americans from voting or even registering to vote. There was a continual threat of violence to those who complained about or disobeyed these laws and rules.
Vaudeville	Variety shows popular in the late 1800's and early 1900's that featured musicians, comedians, dancers, and other entertainers; many African American performers entered show business through vaudeville.
Flapper	In the 1920s, a fashionable young woman intent on enjoying herself and going against conventional standards of behavior.
Jazz Age	In the 1920s, the period between the end of World War I and the beginning of the Depression, when jazz and dance became popular and society was experiencing prosperity, prohibition, and the beginnings of social change.
Harlem Renaissance	A movement that drew upon the heritage and celebration of black culture. A "rebirth" for the African American culture through art, music, and literature. It gave the black community a voice through art, music, and literature to speak about what their life was like in the United States in the 1920s.
Nineteenth Amendment	Amendment to the Constitution in 1919 which gave women the right to vote.

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS:

Before the performance:

- Find out what students already know about Bessie Smith, the "Jazz Age," and the 1920s.
- Make a word web or conceptual map around the words "poverty" and "discrimination."
- Listen to a recording of the blues, especially a song by Bessie Smith.

After the performance:

- Discuss what you liked best about the performance.
- Dramatize a scene from Bessie Smith's life.
- Write, draw, dance, sing about, or act out a favorite part of the performance.

Language Arts:

- Work in small groups to create a newspaper reflecting life in the “American Twenties” – short articles that emphasize the time period, people, lifestyles, events, dreams, ideals and beliefs of the period. Include headlines and illustrations and give your newspaper a jazzy name.
- Write a Blues Song – Work in small groups to brainstorm a list of individual struggles students might encounter. Each person in the group then chooses one of the listed items and begins to “lament on paper” by writing down phrases that come to mind expressing sadness because of the problems and struggles in life. Share your lyrics with your group through reading or singing the words in a blues style.
- Write a first person narrative from the perspective of Bessie Smith in which you tell the story of traveling through the South to perform. Read your story to the class.
- Dramatize one or more portions of Bessie Smith's life by creating a script, characters, scenery, props, and costumes. Act it out.
- Create a scene, monologue, or movement piece inspired by one of the songs included in the lesson.
- Singers - Brainstorm a list of current famous African American female singers. Choose one, then create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast her to Bessie Smith.
- Read about the vaudeville or minstrel performance circuit. Write a short story based on the life a performer.
- Radio took off as a popular media form in the 1920s. Work in a small group to create a radio show by designing a fictional radio station and developing a show timeframe with performers, show sponsors, and actual music. “Broadcast” your show in your classroom.

Math:

- In the 1920s, the average yearly salary was about **\$3,269**. A person made an average wage of **20¢ / hour**. Create budgets for a family of four with this average salary and average hourly wage.

What do you discover? Use these prices as a guide and google the prices of more items from the 1920s:

house = \$2,205	Butter 1 lb. = 70¢	Chevy Truck = \$545
bacon = 52¢	Cabbage 1 lb.= 2¢	Sweaters = 95¢
bread = 12¢		

- Create a bulletin board of grocery items and their prices from the 1920s. Discuss these items in relation to today's prices. Draw conclusions about the relationship between pricing in the twenties and pricing today. Use the terms "less than, greater than, and equal to" in your discussion.

Social Studies:

- Research more about America during the Jazz Age and make a PowerPoint presentation of your findings to show to the class. Ideas to include:
 - ✓ The "firsts" of this decade – radio, moving pictures, jazz, women's right to vote, commercially produced peanut butter, etc. – and the impact these "firsts" had on society then and now.
 - ✓ The national mood after WWI.
 - ✓ National issues politicians were discussing.
 - ✓ The American economy .
 - ✓ Events that led to the Crash of 1929.
 - ✓ Poverty and discrimination in the 1920s.
- Make a Jeopardy Game with facts from the 1920s. Get points for asking the correct questions. Some ideas to consider:
 - ✓ What was America's cultural climate after troops returned home from WWI.
 - ✓ In what ways was this new society dominated by youth and luxury?
 - ✓ What was the "Jazz Age?"
 - ✓ Who were the artists, authors, and musicians that contributed to the cultural shift of the 1920s?
 - ✓ How did African American culture begin to change American society?
 - ✓ What was the Harlem Renaissance?
- Dress and act in the style of the day of the 1920s, including learning how to perform the Charleston.
- Imagine the clock has rolled back to the era of the 1920s. In a small group, brainstorm the pros and cons of living in the 1920s and record your thoughts on a T-Chart. Think about the economy labor/work force status, women's status, social status, racial status.
- With a partner, create a scrapbook for the 1920s that reflects the era. Acquire at least ten pieces of memorabilia for your scrapbook. Share in a small group.

- Bessie Smith was given a challenging start to her life, raised in poverty in the segregated South. In a small group, discuss the Jim Crow laws. What were the causes and effects? How were these laws changed? Discuss these laws in terms of today's society. Reflect on the ways that segregation would have affected African Americans during the '20s. Discuss why segregation is antithetical to the "all men are created equal" premise of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.
- Explore the women's suffrage movement and Investigate women in business before, during, and after WWI. Create a timeline or narrative, on the life of a female entrepreneur.
- Identify key individuals of the 1920s and explain their impact on society, including: Henry Ford, Eugene Debs, W. E. B. Du Bois, Clarence Darrow, William Jennings Bryan, Charles Lindbergh, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Charlie Chaplin, Albert Einstein, Babe Ruth, Marcus Garvey, George Washington Carver, Langston Hughes, F. Scott Fitzgerald, etc. What political, economic and social impact did these individuals have during the 1920s? What were the points of view of these people? Discuss in a small group.
- Imagine yourself living in the 1920s. Adopt an identify of someone you would like to have been. Write a brief chronicle in your "Roaring Twenties" journal about life during this time from their point of view. Be detailed in your reference to actual people and events, as well as in describing your own participation and reactions to life in the '20s. Read your chronicle aloud without stating who you are to see if your classmates can guess your identity correctly.
- Create a timeline of the major arts, social and technological happenings during the 1920s.
- Many blues songs celebrate the powerful Mississippi River and the mighty steamboats in their lyrics. Use blue painter's tape to outline the shape of Mississippi on the classroom floor. Referring to a map, create the Mississippi River by linking hands and arms for the "length" of the river, mimicking the bends and curves in the river. Do a Google search to discover interesting facts about the Mississippi River and make a "fact book" with your findings.
- The gasoline-powered automobile emerged around the same time as the blues, and Henry Ford's *Ford Motor Company* revolutionized the industry with assembly-line production. Ford's Model T car became known as the first car that was "affordable," and it soon became a relatively common sight. Imagine working on an assembly line doing the same thing over and over again. In a small group, discuss how you think this would make you feel and if these feelings could inspire a blues song.

Science:

- Research science and inventions in the 1920s. Make a poster to display your information and make a presentation to the class.
- Work with a partner to find out what technology was available in the 1920s to record and play music and musical performances? Who, besides Thomas A. Edison, was involved in these inventions? How do they differ from the technology of today? Discuss.

- Show examples of record labels, both 78's and 45's, explaining the difference both in time frame and reason for size.
- In 1921 Bessie Coleman became the first African American woman to have an aviation pilot's license, first African American woman to fly a plane and first American with an international aviation pilot's license. Research the life and struggles of Bessie Coleman. Tell her story to the class.
- In 1927, Charles Lindbergh flew The Spirit of St. Louis across the Atlantic nonstop and solo, direct from New York City to Paris, as the first solo transatlantic flight. Google information and images of this flight. Make a poster of your findings.
- In 1928 Alexander Flemming discovered penicillin. This changed the world of modern medicines by introducing the age of antibiotics. With a partner, google the history of penicillin and its impact on society. Discuss with your partner.

Resources:

Related Websites:

<http://www.learner.org/biographyofamerica/prog20/transcript/index.html>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessie_Smith
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6MzU8xM99Uo>
http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_smith_bessie.htm
<http://www.msbluestrail.org/teacher-resources>
<http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/20sfood.html>
<https://www.britannica.com/blackhistory/article-9002305>
<https://www.britannica.com/blackhistory/timeline?tocId=9433428§ion=252280>
[PPT]Chapter 24, Section 3 *The Jazz Age*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/jimcrow/stories_events_harlem.html
<http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/great-migration>
http://womenshistory.about.com/od/aviationpilots/a/bessie_coleman.htm

Related SmartBoard Sites

<http://exchange.smarttech.com/search.html?q=%201920%27s%20history>
<http://exchange.smarttech.com/search.html?q=%20Harlem%20Renaissance>
<http://exchange.smarttech.com/search.html?q=%20Blues%20Music>



ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Actress, storyteller, playwright, director, radio personality, teacher and mentor, Jean Donatto brings years of varied experience to each performance and workshop. As a seasoned professional actress, Jean appeared in such popular films as Home Fries, and was featured in the KHOU production of Gumby's Playhouse. Trained by the American Conservatory Theater, Jean also performs frequently with Houston's Ensemble Theater, Stages Repertory Theatre and The Presidio in San Francisco. Jean's commitment to children is evident in her numerous and influential roles in many educational organizations including the Children's Prison Art Project, the Texas Institute for the Arts in Education, the Texas Trunk Theater, Houston Grand Opera S.T.A.R.S. program, and Young Audiences of Houston.