

AAG

THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM 1963

**MAY 3 -
MAY 22**

Co-Commissioned by Seattle Children's Theatre in Seattle, WA, (Courtney Sale, Artistic Director), Chicago Children's Theatre in Chicago, IL, (Jacqueline Russell, Artistic Director) and the LAUNCH PAD at University of California, Santa Barbara – Department of Theater and Dance in Santa Barbara, CA in 2017 (Risa Brainin, Artistic Director).

Based on the book by
Christopher Paul Curtis

Adapted by
Cheryl L. West

Directed by
Risa Brainin





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MAY 3 – MAY 22 | RECOMMENDED FOR
PATRONS 8 YEARS & OLDER

Based on the award-winning, groundbreaking novel by Chris Paul Curtis, this powerful play follows 10-year-old Kenny Watson and his family on a road trip from Flint, Michigan to Birmingham, Alabama. As the family travels through unfamiliar territory in the Deep South during the Jim Crow era, they encounter racism unlike anything they have experienced before. After a local church is attacked, an event that marks Civil Rights history, the Watson family comes together and proves that perseverance and resiliency can be found in the most unimaginable places.

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SYNOPSIS

The Watsons Go To Birmingham–1963 is a theatrical adaptation of the children's novel by Christopher Paul Curtis. The play begins as we hear the sound of an old Plymouth ignition starting, and the lights come up to reveal Kenny, the play's main character, hiding behind their family couch. Characters appear on stage in tableau, all members of Kenny's family, frozen from moments in his memory. The lights shift again to reveal a projected map of Birmingham, Alabama, then Kenny's family begins speaking to one another in a distorted echo; lights shift and everyone disappears except for Kenny's brother, Byron.

Byron is eating from a box of cereal, and chastises his brother for hiding behind the couch, while "Rocky and Bullwinkle" plays on TV. Byron exits and Kenny crawls out from behind the couch, addressing the audience for the first time. Kenny explains that though his family has always been called the "Weird Watsons," their recent trip to Alabama has caused everything to feel more than strange. Kenny begins to recount how the family came to take the trip from Michigan to Alabama that summer. We learn of an earlier day that winter, when Byron's lips were frozen to the mirror of the family Plymouth. It's amusing and a little scary all at once, and when Byron is freed from the situation his parents are frustrated, and he is less than grateful.

Kenny recounts another day when Byron and a friend, Buphead, decided to skip class. The Watson parents discuss Byron's cutting class earlier that day, and how a summer in Birmingham, Alabama, where their Grandma Sands lives, might be just the course correction Byron needs. Dad is concerned given the civil unrest occurring there, and just before their conversation ends Byron returns home to reveal he spent an evening processing his hair that he should have been studying; it is quickly determined that Byron will, indeed, be spending the summer in Alabama.

Lights shift and we are moved forward in time, the beginning of summer. We see the Watsons preparing for their journey, loading the car, and departing. Dad reveals a very exciting drive around record player the family will be able to enjoy on their trip, and Kenny asks to hear his favorite song, "Okedoke." Mama reminds Dad of the schedule and import that they stick to the motels and rest stops identified as safe in *The Negro Traveler's Green Book*. The tenure in the car changes with each passing mile and moment; Dad presses forward in their drive despite Mama wanting to stop at Green Book listed locations. The parents are tense when a cop car blazes by them, or a bathroom break has to occur on the side of the road, but we are most conscious of the change in tenure when two white men stop the Watsons car and inquire about their travels, home town, and relationship to the protests, leaving the family alone, but not without a threat.

We learn that Dad opted to drive straight through to Alabama and make no motel stops when the family arrives at Grandma Sands early the next morning, days before planned. Though Kenny and his sister Joey have never met Grandma Sands before, Byron has, and his respect shows, surprising Kenny. As days pass, we get glimpses of the family's time in Alabama. Kenny ignores his grandma's recommendation to avoid a particular swimming hole, and almost finds himself swallowed up by a whirlpool, until Byron manages to save him. That experience has a hold on Kenny, and as he has mistaken the word "whirlpool" for "Wool Pooh," he now imagines a creature was dragging him into the murk. Days later, though Kenny is still somewhat shook, he offers to walk Joey to Sunday School. Just as we see Joey say goodbye to Kenny, there is a sonic BOOM, an explosion: the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. Kenny hears screams, cannot find his sister, and in the confusion believes he also sees the Wool Pooh, swirling up and around the debris, himself, and his sister's shoe.

Kenny runs all the way back to Grandma Sands' and discovers his sister is there, the Wool Pooh has not taken her. He describes the other young women he saw after the bombing, stomping his glasses to bits as he tries to un-see the aftermath in his memory. The family hurriedly packs to return to Michigan, saying goodbye to Grandma Sands a week before their scheduled departure.

The scene transitions again, and we are back in Flint, where we started with Kenny behind the couch. Kenny is narrating their departing journey as he remembers it, when Byron enters. Byron encourages Kenny to stop hiding when Kenny reveals that he is hiding from the Wool Pooh; Kenny believes it is still coming for him and Joey. It is in this moment that Byron reminds Kenny he saved Joey, that Kenny was incredibly brave back in Alabama and could be that brave again.

As Kenny and Byron work out their new brave warrior call, the rest of the family appears, preparing to celebrate Kenny's birthday in the family car. They assert that Kenny can play his favorite song, "Okedoke," and Dad gives Kenny his new glasses, repaired since being destroyed in Alabama. Kenny finally feels safe to give Joey back the shoe he'd been keeping safe from Wool Pooh, and makes a birthday wish as the lights dim.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR RISA BRAININ

You talked a bit at first rehearsal about your and Courtney Sale's history with this commission, something our audiences may not realize. Can you share a bit of that history with our readers?

RISA: I am the Founder / Artistic Director LAUNCH PAD at UC Santa Barbara, a program dedicated to developing new plays. Former SCT Artistic Director Courtney Sale and I decided to collaborate on a project and began by talking about playwrights we both admire. Cheryl L. West came up immediately. We approached Cheryl, and after brainstorming many ideas, we landed on *Watsons* as a perfect fit for Seattle audiences as well as our Santa Barbara community. Cheryl had also been in conversation with Jacqui Russell, Artistic Director of Chicago Children's Theatre, about this piece. The next step was for all of us to meet. Well, in our first Zoom, we instantly connected and decided to collaborate. In July 2017, LAUNCH PAD, Seattle Children's Theatre, and Chicago Children's Theatre co-commissioned Cheryl L. West to adapt this wonderful book by Christopher Paul Curtis into a play. We had our first workshop in Seattle in the summer of 2018 followed by a LAUNCH PAD workshop/reading in September. Then LAUNCH PAD did what we call a "preview production" in January 2019 – which means that the play has all the bells and whistles of production, but stays in previews so the writer can continue revising the play all through the performances. On the heels of that production, Chicago Children's Theatre did their very successful production in February 2019. We originally planned the SCT version in 2020, and we all know what happened then. Indiana Repertory Theatre and First Stage Milwaukee have also produced the play. I'm so proud and happy to FINALLY be back in the room with this beautiful play at SCT.

You also mentioned the cultural relevancy when the commission was conceived, and that you believe *The Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963* has only grown in relevancy and import since then. Why do you believe that?

RISA: Over the past two and a half years, many have compared the Black Lives Matter protests and response to George Floyd's murder to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. So many inequalities and injustices that we wish were a thing of the past are still very much here. And today, even more than when we first commissioned the play, equality and justice for people of color is under attack. From attempts to curtail voting rights, to the censoring of teaching history, there is a strong movement to go backwards in time.

You've had a lot of time with this piece, from commission to LAUNCHPAD, through a COVID hiatus, and returning to the rehearsal room this year; I can only imagine you've come to know it very well and in numerous ways. I'm curious, though, what surprises you discovered once you were in the room with this cast and creative team?

RISA: We have three new designers working on the project: Trevor Bowen on costumes, Miko Simmons on projections, and Burton Yuen on scenery. And, though two actors were involved in workshops either in Seattle or Santa Barbara, everyone else is new to the play. I love knowing a play this deeply. In a way, that level of familiarity allows me to be completely open to discover the play all over again through the eyes of my new collaborators. In rehearsal, we'll be working on a scene and I'll remember how I directed it the last time. But then an actor may offer an idea that I never thought of before, and it is thrilling! The same has been true throughout the design process. For example, Miko Simmons remembered looking through a view-master when he was a kid (it came out in 1962). This became his approach for the projections design — to make it feel like the audience is looking through a view-master. I love this idea which is a completely different approach from the way we worked on the projections before. That's the joy of the process for me.

We know Cheryl L. West adapted Christopher Paul Curtis' book for the stage, and a script leads your work as a director. Can you speak to your relationship with the book?

RISA: I read the book for the first time five years ago and adored it. I so admire that the message is there, but not delivered in a heavy handed manner. Rather, the story unfolds through a series of mostly humorous tales about the beautiful, loving, eccentric Watson family. I became empathetic with Kenny as he was experiencing what he experienced - right there in the moment. Christopher Paul Curtis tells a difficult story with hope, humor, and healing.

CHERYL L. WEST

HER WORK AND THE PLAYWRITING PROCESS

BY ABBY WESLEY

This work is reprinted with permission of the author, Abby Wesley, and the Education and Engagement Team at Goodman Theatre in Chicago, IL. It was originally published in their 20-21 study guide for *Fannie Lou Hamer: Speak on It!*

“In my family, if you could tell a good story... they liked to see you coming.”
– Cheryl L. West

WHO IS CHERYL L. WEST?

Coming from a long line of storytellers, Cheryl L. West is a playwright originally from Chicago, Illinois, who now calls Seattle, Washington home. From children’s shows to plays to musicals, her work has graced the stages of numerous regional theatres, including the Goodman (*Puddin’ N’ Pete*, *Play On!*, *Pullman Porter Blues*). Her plays have also been performed on Broadway, off Broadway, and internationally.

WHY IS SHE IMPORTANT?

West is the playwright of *The Watsons Go To Birmingham—1963* and *Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It*, among many other titles! She is the most produced living playwright at Seattle Repertory Theatre and the first African-American woman to win the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. As both an accomplished playwright and woman of color, West advocates for more diversity in theatre for young audiences, calling for a wider range of stories to be told onstage by actors, directors, and playwrights of color, giving voice to stories that are often left out of the overall theatre landscape.

EARLY CAREER

Before Cheryl L. West’s journey as a playwright began, she worked as a social worker and teacher and studied journalism. Although newspapers recruited her early on in her career, she decided that she wanted to pursue playwrighting full-time and gave herself a timeline of five years to be able to support herself financially. When speaking on this decision in an interview with Seattle Rep’s Artistic Director, Braden Abraham, West remarked that she wanted to write fiction because “...you don’t have to hurt people and I felt in journalism sometimes you had to make those choices, and they hurt people.”

In 1987, West won the opportunity to participate in the Group Theatre’s Multicultural Playwrights Festival, which she credits as launching her career. She workshopped her first play *Before It Hits Home* at this festival. West succeeded in supporting herself financially as a playwright within the fourth year of her timeline when her first play was produced.

HER PROCESS

Since West is often balancing five or six projects at any given time, she works closely with dramaturgs to help shape her understanding of the world her characters live in. In an interview with Courtney Sale, the Nancy L. Donahue Artistic Director at Merrimack Repertory Theatre and former Artistic Director at Seattle Children’s Theatre, West revealed that her writing process includes “10-15 rewrites before it sees a workshop” and that the collaborative process with directors, actors, and other creatives “...teaches you what the play is trying to be.”

West also detailed how writing new work not only takes craft, but an immense amount of courage. When asked if she knows what she is capable of when she begins to write a play, West responded, “I know I have what it takes to complete a piece of work, but sometimes that piece of work eludes you at that moment, and sometimes you have to put it aside and work on something else. And it might just be because you’re afraid of it. It might be your most honest work, and you’re not ready for that yet.” The honesty in West’s work has caused immense controversy over the years. In an interview with Seattle reporter Marcie Sillman, West revealed that she “took a lot of heat” for her 1990 play *Before It Hits Home*, which West describes as the first play about the AIDS crisis told from a Black perspective. For that, she received backlash including death threats, according to Willa Taylor, the Walter Director of Education and Engagement at the Goodman, who was working on a production of *Before It Hits Home* at the Public Theater in 1992. Despite this, West continues to write work that she feels is vital at this moment.

HER WORK

Many of Cheryl L. West’s plays revisit difficult moments in history, allowing audiences to consider the historical contexts of the problems we are facing today. Her adaptation of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* focuses on the events surrounding the 1963 Birmingham church bombing. *Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It!* examines the Civil Rights Movement and Fannie Lou Hamer’s trailblazing efforts to ensure that Black Americans were able to register to vote in Mississippi.

Describing the process of writing about historical figures, West remarked, “I like to do these unsung hero pieces because they help me on my own courage journey.” When speaking about her piece on Fannie Lou Hamer, she added, “...she was one of the most incredible folk heroes that America ever produced.”

Music is another prevalent theme in many of West’s plays. Specific songs are listed as part of the piece to help visualize time and place. Songs such as “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” and “Okie Dokie Stomp” in *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* and “This Little Light of Mine” and “We Shall Not Be Moved” in *Fannie Lou Hamer, Speak On It!* encapsulate the sound and shape of the lives of the people from these times.

When talking about the ideal audience for her work, specifically new work, West visualizes them as possessing “...a level of curiosity about a story outside of their direct experience, and yet in coming to that story, they discover their own humanity.” West’s storytelling capabilities allow even those who are unfamiliar with the subjects she explores to pursue their own journey to understanding and self-discovery through the worlds of her plays.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROJECTION DESIGNER MIKO SIMMONS

1. Some of our audience members may be seeing projections for the first time in *The Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963*. Can you tell us what a projection designer does?

MIKO: A projection designer creates at the intersection of scenic and lighting design, essentially creating digital animations and scenic elements that paint the worlds the play exists within.

2. Where do you draw your inspiration from for this production?

MIKO: My inspiration for this particular play comes from two places. First, the “liberatory consciousness” of the Watsons family in that era, in many ways, reflects my personal family history, with roots in the south and the coming-of-age story of the young characters that everyone can relate to, regardless of background. Second, visually as a child of the 60’s, my favorite toy was called a View Master, glasses you looked through that created 3D stereographic, photographic, images on a disc that were truly magical. I’m hoping that the 3D animated worlds the Watsons navigate through inspire this generation the same way I was inspired!

3. Can you tell us what the design process looks like for projections? What’s your favorite part?

MIKO: My design process is to build 3D modeled worlds that are then projection-mapped onto stage panels to build live environments. It involves a lot of drawing and visualizing and math! My favorite part is bringing magical, cinematic techniques to live stage performance and seeing how the worlds transport us into the story, in ways not imagined before.

3. What advice do you have for our young audience who might be interested in projection design?

MIKO: My advice is to study art, study animation, study physics and math, study theatre, film, and storytelling, go on YouTube and learn to be a creator of computer graphics rather than just a consumer of video games. There are a lot of free tools to begin with online. And finally, I would recommend seeking out and studying the work of artists that inspire you. Follow them and learn from them in every way possible.

STATE LEARNING STANDARDS

Watsons Go To Birmingham 1963 touches on many themes and ideas for you to discuss with your young person and/or classroom. Here are a few we believe would make good discussion topics: Perseverance, Identity, Exclusion, Civil Rights, and Family.

SCT believes that seeing the show and using our Active Audience Guide (AAG) can help you address these 21st-Century Skills:

- Citizenship
- Creative Thinking
- Collaboration
- Critical Thinking
- Communication
- Growth Mindset

Seeing the show and using the AAG can help educators meet many of the Washington State Standards. Below are some that might fit in well with certain articles or activities. Where more than one standard within a specific area applies, we selected a few examples. Multiple standards could apply to most of these articles and activities.

Standards are grouped by the AAG articles and activities they connect to. Descriptive text of chosen standards is on the following page.

ATTENDING A PERFORMANCE OF WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM 1963

ARTS

Theatre Arts | Anchor Standards 7–11

SOCIAL STUDIES

Civics | 1.1, 1.2, 1.4

History | 4.1, 4.1, 4.3

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR RISA BRAININ AND MEET CHERYL L. WEST: HER WORK AND PLAYWRITING PROCESS

These Articles explore the inspirations and creative processes for some socially engaged theatre artists.

ARTS

Theatre Arts | Anchor Standards 7, 8, 11

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Reading Standards for Informational Text | RI.1, RI.2

ACTIVITY PAGES

ARTS

Dance | Anchor Standards 1–2

Theatre Arts | Anchor Standards 1–2

Visual Arts | Anchor Standards 1–2

SOCIAL STUDIES

Social Studies Skills | 5.1, 5.3

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Writing | W.1, W.2, W.3, W.4, W.7, W.8, W.9

Speaking and Listening | SL.1, SL.2

WASHINGTON STATE K-12 LEARNING STANDARDS

ARTS

Theatre Arts

Anchor Standard 1 | Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2 | Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 3 | Refine and complete artistic work.

Anchor Standard 4 | Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.

Anchor Standard 5 | Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

Anchor Standard 6 | Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

Anchor Standard 7 | Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8 | Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard 9 | Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

Anchor Standard 10 | Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

Visual Arts

Anchor Standard 1 | Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Anchor Standard 2 | Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Civics

1.1 | Understands key ideals and principles of the United States, including those in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and other fundamental documents.

1.2 | Understands the purposes, organization, and function of governments, law, and political systems.

1.4 | Understands civic involvement.

History

4.1 | Understands historical chronology.

4.2 | Understands and analyzes the causal factors that have shaped major events in history.

4.3 | Understands that there are multiple perspectives and interpretations of historical events.

4.4 | Uses history to understand the present and plan for the future.

Social Studies Skills

5.1 | Uses critical reasoning skills to analyze and evaluate positions.

5.3 | Deliberates public issues.

STATE LEARNING STANDARDS

COMMON CORE

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS LANGUAGE STANDARDS

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

L.1 / Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

L.4 / Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on age appropriate level reading and content.

READING STANDARDS: FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS

Phonics and Word Recognition

RF.3 / Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.

READING STANDARDS FOR INFORMATIONAL TEXT

Key Ideas and Details

RI.1 / With prompting and support, ask and answer questions about key details in a text.

RI.2 / With prompting and support, identify the main topic and retell key details of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

RI.7 / With prompting and support, describe the relationship between illustrations and the text in which they appear (e.g., what person, place, thing, or idea in the text an illustration depicts).

SPEAKING AND LISTENING STANDARDS

Comprehension and Collaboration

SL.1 / Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about age appropriate topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

SL.3 / Ask and answer questions about what a speaker says in order to gather additional information or clarify something that is not understood.

Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas

SL.5 / Add drawings or other visual displays to descriptions as desired to provide additional detail.

SL.6 / Speak audibly and express thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly.

WRITING STANDARDS

Text Types and Purposes

W.1 / Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose opinion pieces in which they tell the reader the topic or the name of the book they are writing about and state an opinion or preference about the topic or book (e.g., My favorite book is...).

W.2 / Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to compose informative/explanatory texts in which they name what they are writing about and supply some information about the topic.



W.3 / Use a combination of drawing, dictating, and writing to narrate a single event or several loosely linked events, tell about the events in the order in which they occurred, and provide a reaction to what happened.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

W.8 / With guidance and support from adults, recall information from experiences or gather information from provided sources to answer a question.

AUDIENCE MEMBER GUIDE

Experiencing theatre is a group activity shared not only with the actors, but also with the people sitting around you. Your attention and participation help the actors perform better, and allows the rest of the audience to enjoy the show. *We invite you to laugh when it is funny, cry when it is sad, gasp when it is shocking, but refrain from talking during the show, as it disturbs audience members and performers alike.*

HERE ARE SOME HELPFUL GUIDELINES ON HOW TO ENJOY THE PERFORMANCE:

Leave cell phones, tablets, hand held games, and other distracting and noise-making electronic devices at home or turn them completely off.

Do not text during the performance. The light and the motion is very distracting to those around you, on stage, and the tech crew behind you.

Gum and food must stay in the lobby. Drinks are only allowed if they have a lid.

The lights dimming and going out signal the audience to quiet down and settle in your seats: the play is about to begin.

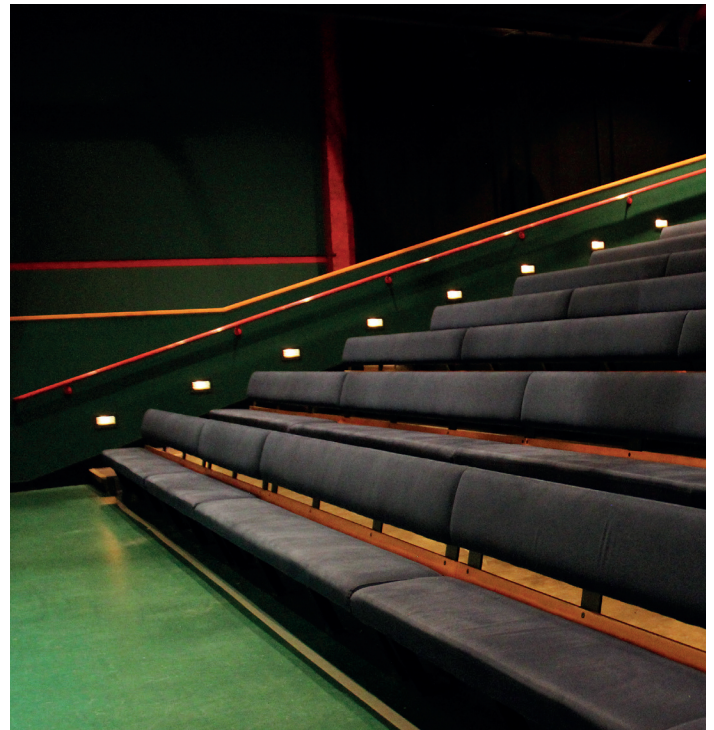
Don't talk with your neighbors during the play. It distracts people around you and the actors on stage.

Focus all your attention on the play to best enjoy the experience. Listen closely to the dialogue and sound effects, and look at the scenery, lights, and costumes. These elements all help to tell the story.

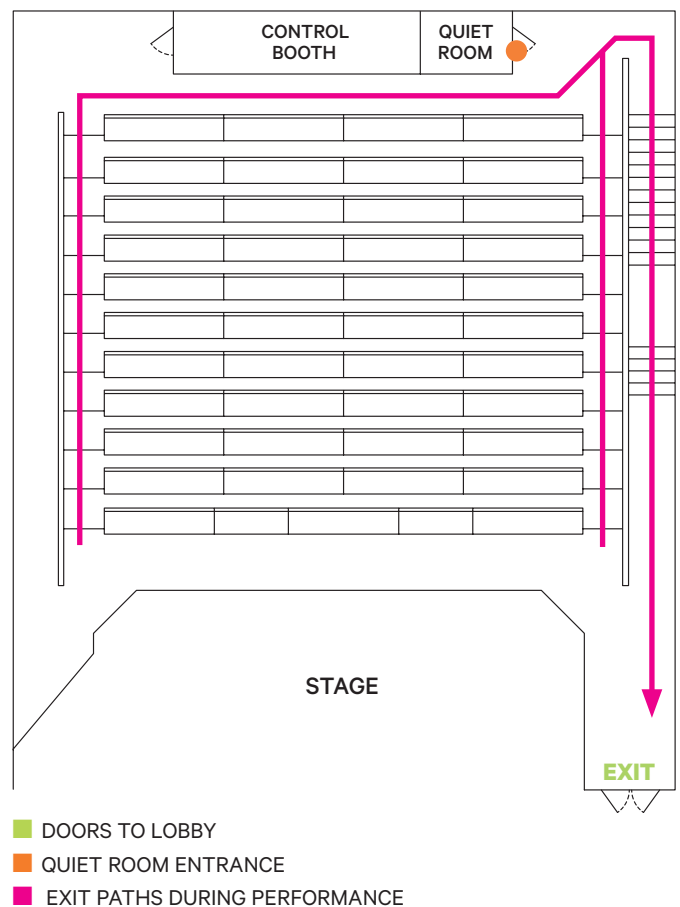
Get involved in the story. Laugh, cry, sigh, gasp — whatever the performance draws from you. The more emotionally involved you are, the more you will enjoy the play.

Remain in your seat during the play. Please use the restroom before or after the show, as well as during intermission.

During the curtain call remain in your seat and applaud because this is part of the performance too. The actors will come out on stage one more time to say thank you for your participation as an audience member.



THE EVE ALVORD THEATRE



SUGGESTED READING

The Watsons Go To Birmingham

by Christopher Paul Curtis

The suggested list are other books that have similar content to *Watsons Go To Birmingham-1963* and/or uplifts and celebrates black voices, storytellers, and writers.

Miles Morales Spider-Man

by Jason Reynolds

The Year We Learned to Fly

by Jacqueline Woodson and
Illustrated by Rafael López

Who Are Your People

by Bakari Sellers and
Illustrated by Reggie Brown

When We Say Black Lives Matter

by Maxine Beneba Clareke

Stamped (for kids)

by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi

One Crazy Summer

by Rita Williams-Garcia

Brown Girl Dreaming

by Jacqueline Woodson

Countdown (The 60's Trilogy #1)

by Deborah Wiles



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THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM -1963

The Road We Travel: Celebrating Intergenerational Activists

May 21, 2022 after the 4:30 PM performance of
The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963

Join Northwest African American Museum and Seattle Children's Theatre for an intergenerational panel of elders in the Civil Rights movement and young leaders today for a conversation about the lived experiences of being young in a period of national conversation around anti-racism.

Moderated by Ms. Michelle Merriwether, President & CEO
of the Urban League.

THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM - 1963

ACTIVITIES

TREE ROOTS ACTIVITY

Grades: 2nd and up

Time: 10 minutes

Set-Up: open space for students to create a seated circle (with chairs, blocks, etc.)

Supplies: long ball of yarn

In *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*, the characters explore the theme of belonging and what keeps them grounded or rooted to ourselves and one another in our community.

In the play, Grandma Sands says to Kenny,

"See all these beautiful trees around here, honey, sometimes the wind and the storms try to knock 'em down, and even man tries to destroy em but every last one of these trees got what you call roots, not all of 'em pretty but them rooters, no matter what's coming at 'em keep these trees standing tall and standing strong for years on end. Same for me, same for you. Our roots, no matter how tangled is always gon' be the family that holds us up and loves us no matter what."

In this welcoming/opening exercise, students will reflect on what some of their roots might be/what keeps them connected and grounded and share as a collective through a visual prop to illustrate how our roots connect and bring us together.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Instructor welcomes students to the space, invites them to find a place for our seated circle, and introduces that in our time together we'll be exploring some of the themes from *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963* through activities.

Instructor asks students to think about a really tall, sturdy tree and what keeps it in place through the years and storms - the roots. Instructor talks through imagery of how deep a tree's roots go into the earth to ground the tree and help it grow strong and stable, making the connection to imagining how we as humans also have roots - things that help us feel safe, connected, loved, strong, etc.

Instructor invites students to reflect on something that might be part of the "roots" in their life - it could be a person, family, friends, a group of people, something they love to do, etc. There's no wrong answer for this reflection, and it's something that is personal and meaningful to each student.

Instructor offers a visual cue for students to show that they've thought of one of their roots and are ready for moving forward in our activity (students looking up at the instructor, students clapping hands together on lap, etc.).

Instructor brings out the ball of yarn and sets-up the activity: we will take turns in the circle sharing something about one of our roots. When it's someone's turn to share, they will hold the ball of yarn; after they share, they will hold onto a small part of the yarn and toss the rest of the ball to someone else in the circle who is ready to share, and so on (creating a web visual in the middle of the circle between all of the students by the time everyone has shared). Instructor begins and shares about their roots first to model as an example, then tosses the ball of yarn across the circle to someone else.

Once everyone has shared and is holding onto the piece of yarn, the instructor takes whatever is left from the ball of yarn and invites students to take a moment looking at the unique, connected visual our yarn is making in the center of the circle. Instructor compares this to how they look like tree roots all interconnected with each other, much like we are a connected community. Instructor offers the observation that already in our short time together today, we've thought about something that gives us strength as individuals and ways that we come together as a team or community.

TRANSITION:

Instructor asks everyone to take a final look at our tree roots we've created together. Now, just as a tree grows leaves, flowers, buds that float out into the world, we're going to transform the yarn into something we want to bring or offer one another for our time today (like a community agreement).

Instructor provides a couple of examples of what that might be - we want to offer kindness, respect, care, curiosity, joy, patience, encouragement, etc.

When students have thought of something they either want to bring to this workshop today and/or bring to their community, instructor cues for the activity to begin - when a student shares their one-word or phrase of what they want to bring, they will release the yarn they are holding, imagining that this is them sending out that intention into the space. If possible, have students go in reverse order of how they shared for the first yarn prompt (ie. the last person to share for the roots activity will be the first person to share their intention for this round, and so on). After a student shares and releases the yarn they were holding, the next person to go will gently roll that yarn back up, share, and then pass it to the person next, and so on, until the yarn is back into a rolled up ball. Instructor can help facilitate transition/rolling up of yarn if needed.

Instructor thanks the group for sharing today and encourages everyone to hold that tree root visual in their minds as a way to know that we have ways to help us feel grounded and supported as individuals and that we are a community and can support one another too. Moving forward, we'll also make sure to keep those intentions in mind as well.

THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM - 1963

ACTIVITIES

WISH ACTIVITY

Grades: 2nd and up

Time: 15 minutes

Set-Up: open space with enough room for students to find a comfortable seated spot to reflect

Supplies: battery operated candle, calm instrumental music (Billie Holiday, Duke Ellington, and Randy Weston are great options).

In The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963, it's the character Kenny's birthday and his Mama works on a special birthday cake with candles for him. Everyone asks him what he wants to wish for when he blows out the candles, and Kenny reflects on what his wish for other kids or the world might be. In an exercise inspired by the power of hope and taking care of ourselves through mind-body connection, students will explore deep breathing and relaxation techniques and reflect on a wish they have for other youth or the world.

INSTRUCTIONS:

Ask students to make a wide circle/find a comfortable spot in the room to be where they have a little bit of space from each other.

Introduce and facilitate meditative breathing options for students to follow along:

- Square breathing - breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, repeat
- 4-7-8 breathing - breathe in for 4 counts, hold for 7 counts, exhale for 8 counts, repeat

Instructor dims the lights and puts a battery operated candle in the center of the room and lets students know that we're going to take a couple of minutes playing some gentle music and doing some relaxing breathing, encouraging students to use one of the breathing techniques we just practice together or whatever way of breathing feels good for them today. While they breathe, they can listen to the music and focus on the candle in the center of the room if they'd like to have something to look at.

Instructor plays a calm, instrumental song for 2-3 minutes and lets students explore breathing and calming techniques.

Instructor gently fades out music and quietly instructs students that for the next song they'll play, to continue their breathing and relaxing, and now think of a wish that they'd like to make. It could be a wish for other youth they know, youth everywhere, or even the world in general. What's something they'd like to wish for that could be helpful, healing, positive, supportive, etc. for other youth?

Instructor plays a calm, instrumental song for 1-2 minutes and lets students explore breathing and calming techniques and think about a wish.

If time allows: Instructor gently fades out music and invites students to spend a couple of minutes drawing or journaling (depending on the age group) about their wish.

REFLECT:

Ask students to return to neutral and form a sitting down circle. Use the following prompts to guide reflection:

- How did you feel after the breathing/calming exercise? How did your body/mind change?
- What is one of the things you wish for (if students want to share - they could either just share a 1 word summary that represents their wish, show their drawings in a circle, or invite anyone who wants to share to do so).

CLOSING:

Instructor facilitates a way for everyone to "put their wish into the universe" through a collective movement or action. For example, it could be taking a deep breath in/out and imagining that our wishes will create positive energy out into the world when we exhale, or creating a collective movement or gesture such as lifting the arms up and out together with that same imagery, etc. When students complete this action, the instructor turns off the candle, just as the candle goes out on a birthday cake after the wish is made.

NEXT UP

TICKETS AT WWW.SCT.ORG



JUNE 1 - JUNE 12

Conceived and Created by
Seth Bloom & Christina Gelsone

Performed by **Seth Bloom & Christina Gelsone**

Air Sculptures in collaboration with **Daniel Wurtzel**

Directed by **West Hyler**