

Metro Theater Company

Battledrum

book and lyrics by Doug Cooney ★ music by Lee Ahlin

In This Guide You'll Find:

Insight into the play and production

Discussion ideas to stimulate interest and reflection

Classroom activities linked to Grade Level Expectations

Ideas to help students practice writing skills

Thematic and historical information about the American Civil War

Production Team:

Director: Carol North

Music Director: Peter Hesel

Percussion Coach: Terry Artis

Set Design: Nicholas Kryah

Costume Design: Lou Bird

Lighting Design: John Armstrong

Sound Design: Rusty Wandall

Props Design: Emily Frei

Dramaturge: Ariana Moses

Production Manager: Sarah Rugo

Imagine you are ten years old and you must leave your home and family to go to war. This play invites your students to take that imaginative step into history with young people who were on the front lines of battle during the American Civil War.

Battledrum is a powerful musical that brings to life the challenges of growing up in 1863. Three boys find themselves in the throes of battle as drummers for the Union Infantry. They are challenged by the discipline of their responsibility, of life on the move in the infantry, and the very real danger of war. In the emotionally charged play, the boys reckon with the differences that initially divide them, and discover the true measure of courage and honor.

We hope this guide is a useful tool for you to dig deeper into the historical and theatrical elements of the play as well as explore the themes of courage, honor, home, and friendship with your students.

This production was made possible by a very generous grant from the Whitaker Foundation.



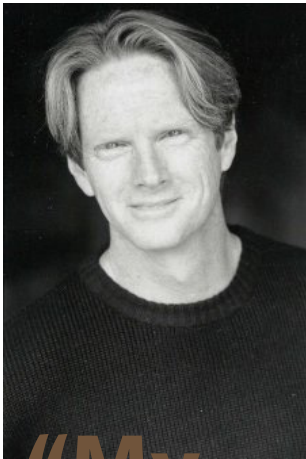


Synopsis

Rufus, a southern boy, is orphaned when his family farm is burnt to the ground in a fire set by the Union infantry. He decides to join the infantry as a second position drummer boy rather than stay behind and starve. Jackson, the first position drummer feels threatened by Rufus and questions his loyalty to the Union, because he is from the South.

The Infantry is on the move, and the boys discover a letter in the pocket of a dead soldier's jacket. Jackson, who is illiterate, pretends to read it aloud in an attempt to impress Rufus. Meanwhile, George Washington, a runaway slave trying to reach freedom on the Underground Railroad, happens upon the two boys. George Washington plays a drum pattern he learned in church and their Corporal overhears. Impressed, the Corporal enlists George Washington as a reserve drummer boy. In addition to his drumming talents, George Washington reveals he can read and write. Rufus gives him the dead soldier's letter to demonstrate his literacy. Jackson's illiteracy is revealed when George Washington reads the correct version of the letter which is not nearly as entertaining. In fact, the letter details the Confederate Army's plans to kill drummer boys as a strategy to cut off their enemy's ability to communicate on the front lines.

The boys realize that danger is imminent when General Cutter, a no nonsense nurse, instructs them on how to clear wounded and dead soldiers from the battlefield. Rufus is overwhelmed and scared about the impending battle and must decide whether he will march beside his new and unlikely friends or run away. In the end, the boys join in the battle against the Confederate troops, which results in Jackson's death, and the infantry surrounded. Rufus is left with the responsibility to continue as the first position drummer boy, and the audience is left with the question of what happened next.



Interview with Playwright Doug Cooney

When did you know you wanted to be a playwright?

When I was a kid I did all kinds of plays in my garage. Sometimes I would take my toys along with my sister's Barbie dolls and use them as puppets. I wrote my first real play in the second grade on an old manual typewriter that I found in the closet. It was a Christmas play about the three kings for our classroom holiday performance.

How did this play come about? What drew you to write about these characters and time period?

I had a group of fifth graders at a songwriting workshop in Los Angeles that were really excited to write a song about Civil War drummer boys. They discovered in their research that opposing armies targeted drummer boys to disable the other side's communication between units. I asked the group "Why would you keep playing the drum if you knew that you could get shot." One of the boys replied, "because the drum makes the fear disappear." I was deeply moved by his response. This line then became one of the songs and a big influence on writing the play.

You also write novels. How is writing a novel different from writing a play?

I am currently working on a book adaptation of the play. When making a play, there are a lot of other creative voices in the room that help tell the story. As the author of a book you have to do all of the design and storytelling by yourself. The reader only has your words to put together the world and find their way through the story.

**"My
Drum
makes
the
fear
disappear..."**

- Rufus and Jackson



Discussion Questions

Help prepare students for the production with these questions:

The Civil War divided the country, communities and families. **What are current issues in our country that divide communities and families? Have you ever disagreed with someone that you care about? What did you disagree about? What did that feel like? How did you talk about it?**

Rufus becomes independent at a young age when he loses his family. **Is there a time in your life when you had to make an important decision on your own? How did that feel?**

During the Civil War, news about the war was mostly shared through letters and word of mouth. **How do you learn about news now? How do you think the media affects how we feel and what we know about such situations?**

Prompt students to use their senses to take in details during the performance:

A set helps place a play in a particular time period or abstractly represents an idea. **How do you think scenic designer Nicholas Kryah's set does one or both of these?**

The stakes are high in Battledrum, danger is right around the corner. **How do the actors use their bodies and voices to communicate this to the audience?**



After the play, help students reflect on their experience with these questions:

What moments in the play stood out to you? Why?

The ending of the play is left open-ended. **Do you think Rufus will stay with the Infantry or leave the army? What do you think happened to the rest of the Infantry and George Washington?**

The play deals with difficult themes such as extreme danger, a nation divided, and the loss of loved ones. **What moment in the play would you describe as the main conflict or climax?**

Rufus, Jackson, and George Washington come from varying backgrounds and lived experiences. **Which character or characters did you most identify with and why?**

Children and the Civil War

What does it mean to be a child today? What did it mean to be a child in the 1860s?

Many scholars believe that childhood is a concept that has evolved throughout history, and in essence, was invented. Published in 1962, *Centuries of Childhood*, by French historian Philippe Ariès, was the first book that investigated the way children are contextualized by society throughout history. Ariès highlighted that it was not until the beginning of the 19th century that childhood in the United States was considered a time of innocence. In addition, some scholars feel that geographic location dictated whether or not childhood could truly be considered a time of innocence. Some argued that rural lifestyles allowed for more carefree childhoods, as children were outside and active, while others believed that rural upbringings meant children were forced to work long, hard hours.

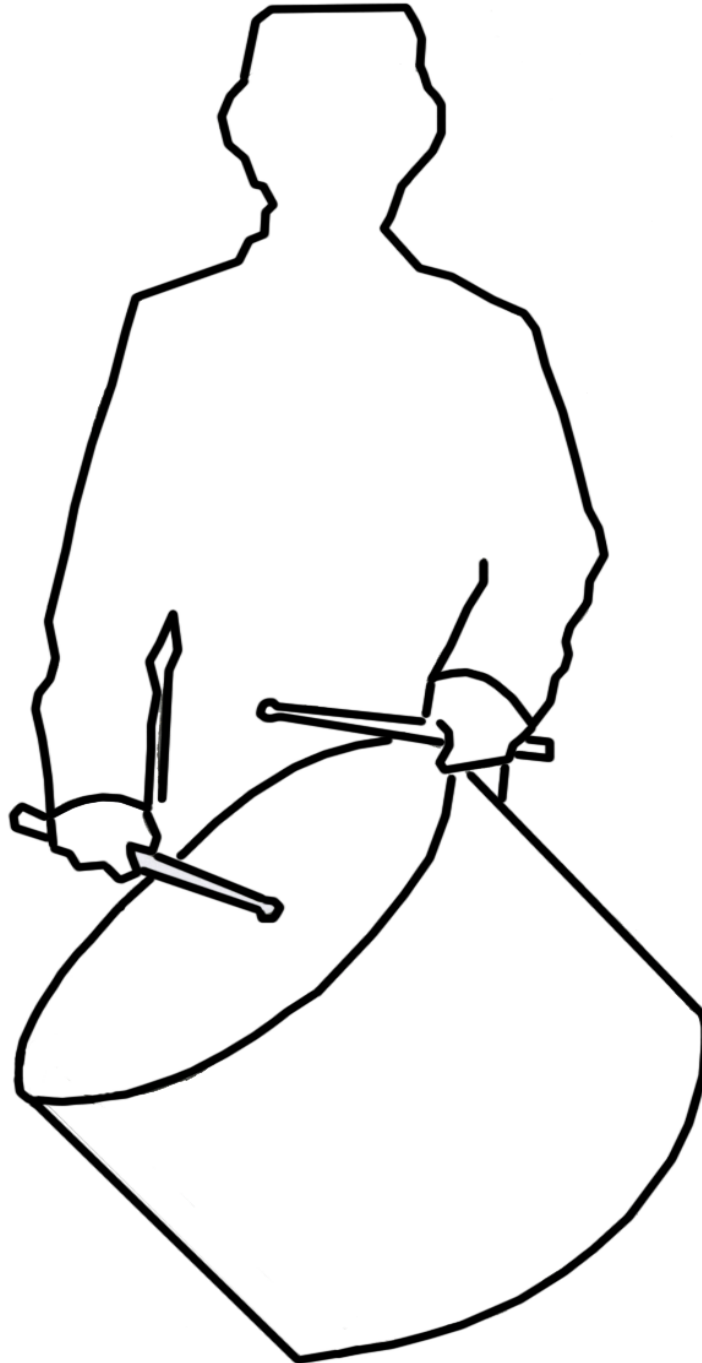
Prior to the mid-1800s children were not required to go to school. And, it was not until later in the century that child labor laws were created and enforced. It was not unheard of for children to take part in war. Interestingly, the idea of an innocent childhood really only applied to white children. African-American children were treated no differently than their adult counterparts.

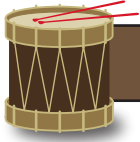
Today the concept of childhood continues to evolve and shift based on cultural, political, geographic and economic influences. Start a discussion with your students about the idea of childhood. Ask your students to compare and contrast the differences between being a child today and in the 1800s. How were children's responsibilities different? What expectations did parents and families have of their children? Would your students rather be a kid today or in the 1800s? Why?



Cause and Effect Character Map

This outline represents the character, Rufus. Recall positive and negative comments that are said to or about Rufus throughout the play. Write these comments outside of the human outline. Next, offer the emotion that Rufus might feel in reaction to these comments, and write them inside the human outline. You may want to draw lines between comments and feelings to demonstrate the idea of cause and effect.





ACTIVITY IDEA

Items Hold Meaning

Have the students close their eyes. Ask them to think about an object that they hold very dear to them. What is it? What does it look like? What does it feel like? What does it smell like? What is its size? Have students draw the object. Next, have them write a descriptive paragraph about their relationship with the object. Ask the students to think about the following questions: Why is this object important to you? How did it come into your possession? How would you feel if you lost it? Would you ever give it to someone? Why or why not?

Missouri Communication Arts Grade Level Expectations: DOK A CA 4, 1.8, 2.1, 2.6, 4.8 Write effectively in various forms and types of writing

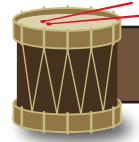


ACTIVITY IDEA

Landmarks

During the American Civil War soldiers navigated between battlefields using compasses, hand drawn maps, and landmarks. Have the students look at a map of their city. What landmarks make your community unique? Each student should pick a landmark. As a group decide on a central place in your community and have students organize their bodies on an imaginary map in relation to that place. They should freeze as a sculpture representing their landmark. This frozen picture can be a concrete or abstract representation of the landmark. [Tip: A good frozen picture should be visually interesting, easily held for a period of time.] Reflect using the following questions. Describe what you see? Is the frozen picture concrete or abstract? How is this landmark unique to your community?

Missouri Social Studies Grade Level Expectations: DOK A SS5 1 1.4, 1.5 SSS 2.1, 3.2, 1.10 Knowledge of major elements of geographical study and analysis (such as location, place, movement and regions) and their relationship to changes in society and the environment



ACTIVITY IDEA

Growing up fast

Journal Entry:

The play begins with Rufus leaving home and the memory of his mother back at the farm. From that moment on, he endures living in the dangerous climate of the war. Over the course of the play he is forced to grow-up quickly and take care of himself. Write a journal entry from Rufus' point of view the night before his first battle.

"How to" Essay:

The boys in this play had a very important job. Without the specific rhythmic patterns (known as 'tattoos') played on the drums, soldiers would not have known when enemies were approaching or when to retreat. What responsibilities do you have in your life? What would happen if you were not there to do a chore at home or school? Imagine that you are leaving on vacation, and someone else is responsible for your task. Write a "How To" essay that describes what needs to be done. Do not forget to think about order and details! Share it with a classmate to see if you have been as clear as possible.

Then and Now:

What makes Rufus, Jackson, and George Washington different from 10 year-olds today? What makes them the same? Compare and contrast the characters from the past with modern day kids. Construct a Venn Diagram to help brainstorm your ideas.

Missouri Communication Arts Grade Level Expectations: DOK A CA 4, 1.8, 2.1, 2.6, 4.8 Write effectively in various forms and types of writing



ACTIVITY IDEA

Practice New Strategies

After the performance, ask students about the different friendships in the play. Have them discuss Rufus and Jackson's relationship. When did Rufus and Jackson become close? What were some of the turning points in their friendship? End by asking the students, "What else could Rufus have done to convince Jackson that he was a loyal friend?"

Have the students improvise a scene in which Rufus convinces Jackson that he can be loyal. Students should feel free to use ideas that came out of the previous discussion. Each pair then shares with the entire class.

As the scenes are performed, reflect with the students using the following questions: Describe the scene you just saw. What was happening? What tactics did Rufus use to convince Jackson he can be loyal?

Missouri Health Education Grade Level Expectations: HE4 A k-8 Decision-Making and Problem-Solving

**"This
Drum
has
got
history."
- Jackson**

Where were the *women* and *girls*?

There are three female characters in *Battledrum* – Mama, Annabelle, and General Cutter the nurse. This particular story does not give a lot of insight into the ways that women and girls were affected by the war.

Many young women and girls served as nurses. They took care of the wounded and dying soldiers. They dealt with sickness and death on a daily basis. Women and young girls were also responsible for keeping farms and businesses running when their husbands, fathers, brothers, and other male relatives went off to fight. Despite their hard work during the war, women and girls were not yet considered equal to men. Women would not win the right to vote for almost fifty years after the American Civil War.

Extend the conversation by inviting your students to compare and contrast the rights and opportunities of women and girls during the 1860s and present day using a Venn Diagram.



ACTIVITY IDEA

Make Some Noise

Gather in a circle. Ask the students to think about the types of movements or sounds they noticed in the production. Next ask a volunteer to move into the center of the circle and make a simple sound and motion that connects to the performance and can be repeated comfortably; this is the first piece of the machine. Volunteer 1 continues while other students add on to the machine with their own sounds and motions. When everyone has joined in, play with tempo and volume. Ask the students to get louder or softer. Have them speed up and then slow down. Reflect with your students asking: what did you notice? How did our class work together in this activity? Why was working together important in *Battledrum*?

Missouri Communication Arts Grade Level Expectations: FA 1 A MU 2 A 6-8, 9-12 Develop and apply instrumental music skills to perform and communicate through the arts



ACTIVITY IDEA

Fun Science Learning: How has medicine evolved since the American Civil War?

Gun shot wounds and hand to hand combat were not the only ways that soldiers and civilians died during the 1860s. Invite students to investigate the many causes of death, and the medicine used to combat these injuries and sickness during the American Civil War.

In small groups, have students research the history of one of the terms listed below (feel free to add to the list), which include both diseases and medical practices common in the 1860s.

- Dysentery
- Folk medicine
- Gangrene
- Home remedies
- Hygiene
- Malaria
- Sanitation
- Sterilization
- Typhoid
- Typhus

Once students have a strong understanding of their topic, ask them to compare the ways in which modern medicine has evolved from the past. To share their findings with the whole class, students should imagine they are modern day doctors who have traveled back in time to the 1860s. How would they explain their topic to the American citizens who lived during the war? What knowledge might increase their chances of survival?

Missouri Science Grade Level Expectations: DOK G a – 2, b – 2, c – 2, d – 2 Living organisms carry out life processes in order to survive



Letter to Parents and Educators:

Please let us know how this Guide enriched your experience with Battle-drum. Please feel free to share letters, drawings, and projects developed in your classroom. Let us know what sorts of discussions occur at school, in the hallway, lunchroom, staff lounge, or over dinner at home. Your feedback helps us enormously.

Suggested Resources:

<http://www.pbs.org/civilwar/>
PBS website about the American Civil War.

<http://www.mohistory.org/>
Missouri History Museum's Website

Some of our favorite titles are:

B is for Battle Cry: A Civil War Alphabet by Patricia Bauer, illustrated by David Geister
ISBN 978-1585363568

The Last Brother: A Civil War Tale by Trinka Hakes Noble, illustrated by Robert Papp
ISBN 978-1585362530

Pink and Say by Patricia Polacco
ISBN 978-0399226717

Bull Run by Paul Fleischman
ISBN 978-0064405881

Soldier's Heart by Gary Paulsen
ISBN 978-0440228387

Metro Theater Company's Mission

Inspired by the intelligence and emotional wisdom of young people, we create professional theater for young people, foster inclusive community, and nurture meaningful learning through the arts.

Visit our website at www.metrotheatercompany.org or write to: Metro Theater Company

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