



Lady Day at Emerson's Bar & Grill

**Written by Lanie Robertson (1983) Directed by Mitchel Butel
Belvoir Street Theatre 2023**

SUGGESTED DURATION

7-8 x 60 min lessons.

RATIONALE

In this learning sequence students will engage in an empathetic and reflective exploration of Belvoir Street's reimagining of *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill* (Lanie Robertson, 1983). Students will investigate the historical influences on the text and how the playwright, and subsequent theatrical team endeavoured to capture the life and experiences of Billie Holiday. Students will explore the wider social impact Billie Holiday had in her lifetime and significance of her performance at Emerson's Bar and Grill.

STUDENT FOCUS QUESTIONS

- How can art and artist expression bring voice to the marginalised?
- How can historical events influence the development of character on stage?
- How can reflective and empathetic activities add depth to our conceptual understanding of the text?

SUCCESS CRITERIA

Students:

- Engage with the social, historical and political context of a text
- Evaluate how visual features such as set contribute to meaning
- Reflect on how their understanding has been enhanced by an thoughtful and empathetic exploration of character

SYLLABUS LINKS

Preliminary HSC - Read to Write (Standard and Advanced)

HSC - Common Module: Texts and Human Experiences (Standard and Advanced) HSC - Module C: Craft of Writing (Standard and Advanced)

Knowledge, understanding and skills

communicate through speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing use language to shape and make meaning according to purpose, audience and context think in ways that are imaginative, creative, interpretive and critical

express themselves and their relationships with others and their world Students value and appreciate:

the power of language to explore and express views of themselves as well as the social, cultural, ethical, moral, spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of human experiences

the power of effective communication using the language modes of speaking, listening, reading, writing, viewing and representing.



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HSC ADVANCED AND STANDARD

EA12-3 critically analyses and uses language forms, features and structures of texts justifying appropriateness for specific purposes, audiences and contexts and evaluates their effects on meaning

EA12-7 evaluates the diverse ways texts can represent personal and public worlds and recognises how they are valued

EA12-8 explains and evaluates nuanced cultural assumptions and values in texts and their effects on meaning

EN12-3 analyses and uses language forms, features and structures of texts and justifies their appropriateness for purpose, audience and context and explains effects on meaning

EN12-7 explains and evaluates the diverse ways texts can represent personal and public worlds

EN12-8 explains and assesses cultural assumptions in texts and their effects on meaning
Preliminary Advanced and Standard

EA11-3 analyses and uses language forms, features and structures of texts considering appropriateness for specific purposes, audiences and contexts and evaluates their effects on meaning

EA11-7 evaluates the diverse ways texts can represent personal and public worlds and recognises how they are valued

EA11-8 explains and evaluates cultural assumptions and values in texts and their effects on meaning

EN11-3 analyses and uses language forms, features and structures of texts, considers appropriateness for purpose, audience and context and explains effects on meaning

EN11-7 understands and explains the diverse ways texts can represent personal and public worlds

EN11-8 identifies and explains cultural assumptions in texts and their effects on meaning



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ACTIVITIES

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES (3-4 LESSONS)

Contextual Understanding	4
Group Research task	4
Musical Understanding	4

POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES (3-4 LESSONS)

Responding to the play	5
Reflection questions	5
Paragraph response	5
Set design and using visual elements	5
Writing a Vignette and Experimenting with Perspective	6
Guiding interview questions	6
Reflection	6



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PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES (3-4 LESSONS)

CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING

Students are given the following stimulus statement to use as the base for a forum discussion:
Art and artists are central to the wheels of social and political change. Without their influence we are beholden to the powers that be.

In the forum discussion, teachers should allocate a director for the conversation and one to two students to summarise notes in a central location such as a whiteboard, or on a collaborative digital tool such as a Jamboard.

Using the information gathered from the discussion, students create for and against columns and collate information and evidence into each column in response to the following:

To what extent do artists have a responsibility to address social and political issues through their work?

GROUP RESEARCH TASK

Students find a contemporary artist, this can be an actor, film maker, singer, song writer, painter and so on, and they are to write a profile of this persona, summarising their work and the controversy they may have created through the release of their work.

Research can be presented as a folio, a video recording, a podcast, or a group presentation. It is encouraged that presentations are designed to be thoughtful of slide density, and could follow the *Pecha Kucha 20x20* style of presentation where students have 20 slides and 20 seconds of presentation time on each slide.

MUSICAL UNDERSTANDING

LISTEN to Billie Holiday's '*Strange Fruit*' (1959)
Spotify: [tinyurl.com/BillieHoliday-StrangeFruit-SPOTIFY](https://open.spotify.com/track/3X18111101000000000000000000000000)
YouTube: [tinyurl.com/BillieHoliday-StrangeFruit-YOUTUBE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01010101010101010101010101010101)

This song is one of the most chilling and iconic songs produced by the late singer. Students should listen to the song, without context. As comprehension support, a copy of the lyrics should be provided for students to follow along.

RESPONSE QUESTIONS

- How does this song make you feel?
- What images are conjured for you?
- What is the most striking line?
- Is this song similar to anything you listen to?

Students research the history of *Strange Fruit* and its social and political significance, summarising their work into a fact sheet, including 2-3 images that support their investigation.

While students are working, play a series of Billie Holiday's other songs. **Extension:** Students reflect on the musical artists they enjoy. They are to create their own playlist, inspired by Billie

Holiday's music, and support their compilation with a written justification of the reasons behind their song selections. They should consider the musical purpose of their selections, possibly replicating a specific tone or style, or consider the messaging carried through in each song.



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POST-VIEWING ACTIVITIES (3-4 LESSONS)

RESPONDING TO THE PLAY

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Students complete the following reflection questions and activities directly after viewing the performance, or in the lesson afterwards.

- When sitting in the audience waiting for the play to start, what were you expecting to see? What feelings were conjured for you?
- What was the most powerful moment in the performance, why? (Students can compare their answers and should be encouraged to take notes on the responses of others)
- Distil the show into one word.
- Students then created a visual representation of the play, aiming to capture the tone and mood.

PARAGRAPH RESPONSE

Lanie Robertson in her author's note states that "...the performance should be "up-beat" in every way. Joy and humour should be the prevalent emotions felt on stage."

Ask students to compare the above statement with their personal response to the play. Did they feel the same way?

Students compare their answers and write a sustained response to the following questions:

To what extent is Lady Day and Emerson's Grill a joyful exploration of a life?

SET DESIGN AND USING VISUAL ELEMENTS

The set is described by the playwright "as simple as a bare platform with a piano...as elaborate as a recreation of a sleazy bar as the director wishes".

Students create their own version of the setting for this play. They can present their work in the form of an inspiration board, with snippets of venues, other stage spaces, furnishings, or materials that would be used

Students then compose a justification for their set choices and how they have used visual elements to enhance the key concerns of the play.



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WRITING A VIGNETTE AND EXPERIMENTING WITH PERSPECTIVE

Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill focuses on Billie Holiday and her life. In a way, the play is a self-performed obituary as she passes away soon after this show. Billie would have performed for a vast array of people in her career.

Students are to imaginatively create their own character sitting or working in Emerson's Bar and Grill. They should write a profile of this character including physical characteristics, their social, cultural and racial background. They should also contrive other details such as their relationships, personal histories. Students should present their profile in a multimodal form and submit this as a poster for display at a museum exhibition on Emerson's Bar and Grill. They can include images or sketches and should consider how to make their profile captivating for a museum audience.

Once the students have created this persona they then need to consider how they would feel about watching Billie perform at Emerson's Bar and Grill. Using a hot seat style activity students in groups or as a class can interview one another about their experience of Billie's performance. They should try to adopt the voice of their persona and consider how they would answer questions.

GUIDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- What brought you to Emerson's Bar and Grill?
- Do you come here often?
- Did you travel with another person?
- Have you heard of Billie Holiday before?
- Where in the room did you sit?
- What did you think about her performance?
- Was there a particular song you enjoyed?
- What surprised you about the show?
- Who did you see at the show?
- What do you want people to know about Emerson's Bar and Grill?
- Would you come again?

REFLECTION

After the hot seat activity, students complete a sustained written response to the following question:

How did the hot seat activity provide new or divergent thinking on the significance of Billie Holiday, her life and her legacy?