

DUENDE: DRAMA & LITERATURE

“Friendly Fire: A Forty-niner’s Life with the Miwok”

Teachers’ Brief Guide

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Duende: Drama and Literature was founded in 1998 to bring to schools plays on cultural conflict in California history. These works focus on ending the cycles of violence and prejudice that have been and remain so corrosive to human existence. By applying meticulous historical research to the weaving of poignant narratives we create plays whose audiences can simultaneously absorb both the facts and flavors of other eras and cultures. We believe that drama is the ideal medium for presenting the full humanity of people who are different from ourselves. We dramatize the struggles of characters to overcome both their own mistakes and those of their cultures. Thus we provide models of behavior outside the simplistic heroic modes. We stimulate the audiences to question what is the best way to act in the face of internal as well as external conflict.

Rick Foster, a Founder and President of Duende, is a native Californian who has been writing plays for twenty-five years. He began his current series on early California in 1995, while playwright in residence at Sierra Repertory Theatre in Sonoma. He was impassioned by his growing realization that in all his years in California public schools he had never learned about the genocide practiced upon the native peoples nor about the richness of their cultures. Nor was he taught how the unspeakable injustices of the Gold Rush era continued to reverberate through the decades until today. *Friendly Fire* is the expression of this passion.

Thomas F. Maguire, a Founder of Duende, has been acting in California for more than thirty years. He brings to the project a long history of interest in performing works that have a social impact. It was for Maguire that Foster wrote the award-winning 1983 historical play *The Heroes of Xochiquipa*. (Critic Robert Hurwitt found this play illuminating of the U.S. attitudes underlying the military action against Grenada and he later published it in *West Coast Plays*.) Now Maguire plays the part of Jeff Blake, a forty-niner with a conscience, in *Friendly Fire*.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Duende was founded on the premise that one-person plays can present history in a way that is both factually informing and aesthetically satisfying. By dramatizing the struggle of a person to reconcile his or her values with the norms of a society, we believe we can do more in one performance to help people understand other eras and cultures than days of reading textbooks. After experiencing what a drama has to offer, the textbooks can come alive in new ways. *Friendly Fire: A Forty-niner’s Life with the Miwok* grew from our desire to tell the truth about Native Californian cultures and the genocide that was practiced upon them. The students will understand how an ordinary white Forty-niner, full of the prejudice against Indians that was universally accepted in his culture, came to participate in an atrocity against a group of Indians. They will see how his conscience drove him to leave his group and how his whole attitude to Indians changed when he truly got to know them. They will learn to see the Indians through his sympathetic eyes and they will accompany him on his journey of conscience as he struggles to combat the catastrophe that he knows is coming.

OBJECTIVES

To foster understanding of the rich culture of California Indians before contact with Euro/American cultures.

To show the truth about the genocide practiced upon Native Californians during the Gold Rush.

To show how prejudice dissolves with understanding.

To provide a paradigm for the following: a person succumbs to peer pressure and commits an action that is against his values; he regrets the act; he changes his life to work for atonement.

To show how drama and imagination can bring history to life.

PREPARATION FOR THE PROGRAM

Background

For thousands of years California Indian cultures adapted themselves to the varied environments of our region and to each other. Organized into small, independent groups with fixed territories, they prospered without warrior classes, establishing a vast network of intermarriage and trade. Using controlled burns and other pre-agricultural techniques of land management, they did a myriad of things to promote the productivity of their environment, things that the invading cultures ignored until the recent advent of ethno-botany. Despite a century of anthropological work and a culture that survives today, California Indians are still vastly less well-known than those of the Great Plains, Southwest, or Northwest. Most Californians today would be hard pressed to name a single Native Californian except for Ishi--and that of course was not even that great man's real name.

The genocide by which the territory of California was wrested from these peace-loving people is well-documented and yet hardly plays a role in the self-image or historical consciousness of (non-Native) Californians. This disgraceful cornerstone of our State's economic greatness has simply been ignored. By insulating ourselves from the crimes of the past, crimes from which we still benefit, we condemn ourselves to a shallow understanding of the crimes of today, such as what happened throughout the 1990s in former Yugoslavia.

Activities

Read the story of Ishi or of Thomas Jefferson Mayfield (in *Adopted by Indians*, published by Heyday Books). Ask the students to compare California Indian life with what they know about other Indians or what they have seen in films like "Dances with Wolves," or "Pocahontas."

Show a map of California divided by the Indian languages spoken at the time of contact. Explain that each of these divisions represents many independent groups speaking the same language. Then show where gold was discovered, and where the mother lode swept through many groups. Discuss what would happen if thousands of armed men flowed into a region believing they had the right to mine the earth, slaughter the animals, and displace the people who were already living there without asking anyone's permission.

Discuss ethnic prejudice both within the U.S. and outside. Introduce the concepts of genocide and "ethnic cleansing." Discuss what it takes to change prejudice.

FOLLOW-UP IDEAS AND ACTIVITIES

Class Discussion: After seeing *Friendly Fire* return to the discussion about California Indian culture. How did the people know what was happening outside their territory? How far did they trade? What rules governed their marriages? How was work divided? Then move on to discuss the impact of contact. What could the Indians trade for? What did the miners do to the Indians' food supply? Why couldn't the Indians defend themselves better? Why didn't the miners feel guilty for what they were doing to the Indians?

Writing & Research: Have the students write a review of the performance. Compare it to TV, movies, or other plays they might have seen. What did they like best about the performance? What was the most important thing they learned?

Go through the Components of the Visual and Performing Arts Framework using their experience of *Friendly Fire* as a basis for moving from Perception to Informed Judgement.

Arts Extension: Explain to the students that all drama involves conflict. In a play with multiple characters there is conflict between characters. In a one-person play the character can tell about conflicts between other people but the play is strongest when the character explores a conflict with himself or herself. What is the internal conflict for Jeff Blake?

Have the students write a short piece of fiction about other internal conflicts they know about: these can be everyday things like stealing something one shouldn't or lying to get an advantage and then feeling guilty. Encourage them to turn this writing into a fictional dramatic monologue, a page or two long, exploring how the conflict was precipitated (the act of stealing or lying), how the guilt built up and what the character does about it.

VOCABULARY AND KEY CONCEPTS

bunion: A painful, inflamed swelling of the big toe.

cradle: In mining, a box-like device furnished with rockers, used for washing gold-bearing dirt.

Creesus: Jeff Blake's misspelling of Croesus, the King of Lydia (560-546 BC) who was renowned for his wealth.

gumption: Boldness, courage; also shrewdness.

hangi: The large communal structure at the center of a Miwok village, used for ceremonial dances and meetings.

Miwok: The modern name given to peoples speaking a group of related languages and dialects. There were Miwok on the coast in Marin County, near Clear Lake, around Sacramento, and in the Sierra from El Dorado County to south of Yosemite.

Nang-wa: According to Perlot, who learned the Miwok language in the 1850s, this was the name of a god, or primary will, or thought that oversaw the creation of the universe.

nená: The political unit of Miwok culture. It is like a clan (consider the clans of Scotland) or a kinship group controlling a territory agreed upon by the community and surrounding groups.

obsidian: A natural glass that is used for making arrowheads and other sharp objects. The Miwok had to trade for it since none occurred naturally in their territory.

paddle wheel: the big wheel with boards or paddles around its perimeter, driven by a steam-engine to drive a ship through the water.

sidewheeler: A steamship with the paddle wheel on the side, as opposed to the rear, of the ship.

RESOURCES

Blackburn, Thomas C., and Anderson, Kat, editors. *Before the Wilderness: Environmental Management by Native Californians*. Menlo Park, Ballena Press, 1993.

A wide compilation of the breakthrough scholarship detailing how carefully and completely the California Indians managed their ecosystem.

Hinton, Leanne. *Flutes of Fire: Essays on California Indian Languages*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1994.

An indispensable and delightful introduction to the topic, covering much more than “just” the languages.

Hurtado, Albert L. *Indian Survival on the California Frontier*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988.

An excellent account of the entire period from the arrival of the Spanish to the completion of the railroad. Both scholarly and readable.

Margolin, Malcolm, editor. *The Way We Lived: California Indian Reminiscences, Stories and Songs*. Berkeley, Heyday Books, 1981.

An indispensable collection.

Mayfield, Thomas Jefferson. *Indian Summer: Traditional Life among the Choinumne Indians of California's San Joaquin Valley*. Forward by Malcolm Margolin. Introduction by Frank F. Latta. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1993.

This astonishing book is made of the recollections of Mayfield, recorded by Frank Latta in 1928. Mayfield had come to California at age six with his parents in 1850. After the death of his mother, his father allowed him to live with the Choinumne in Fresno County during the last years of their intact way of life. Later, he was sent to school and beaten for admitting he had lived with Indians. He decided to keep quiet and had told no one of his experiences until, in his eighties, he was approached by Latta. The book provides an unparalleled account of the life of a San Joaquin Valley people. Heyday has also published a children's version of the story titled *Adopted by Indians*.

Perlot, Jean-Nicolas. *Gold Seeker: Adventures of a Belgian Argonaut during the Gold Rush Years*. Edited by Howard R. Lamar. Translated by Helen Harding Brentnor. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985

This contains perhaps the most sensitive description of Sierra Miwok life recorded by an eyewitness. Perlot was remarkably free of the prejudices that blinded most white authors of the day and he actually bothered to learn Miwok and discuss philosophical issues with the Indians he befriended.

Sarris, Greg, editor. *The Sound of Rattles and Clappers: A Collection of New California Indian Writing*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1994

An introduction to what the survivors are writing and thinking now.

Note: All people interested in California Indians should get a current catalog from Heyday Books, Box 9145, Berkeley, CA 94709, the prime publisher on the subject, and should consider subscribing to their periodical: *News from Native California*.