

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Title: Production Design Adaptation

Grade Level: 9-12th

Length: 45 minutes

Literary Work: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Malcolm X and Alex Haley)

Opera: *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (Anthony Davis, composer; Thulani Davis, librettist)

Inquiry Question: How does stage and visual design aid in storytelling?

Lesson Focus: Students will use critical thinking, creativity, social-emotional learning, and collaboration while exploring stage design and the visual world of storytelling in opera.

Prior Knowledge: Students have studied the history of Malcolm X and read a literary work inspired by his life, analyzed characters and can name the Who, What, When, and Where, participated in the Exploring Story Adaptation lesson, and created an opera adaptation pitch.

Materials: Copies of the literary work, presentation slides (includes *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* opera synopsis with photography and video examples), libretto excerpts of key scenes, completed opera adaptation pitch worksheets (from Exploring Story Adaptation lesson), production design definitions handout, elements of design definitions handout, costume design worksheet, set design worksheet, production design questionnaire, student laptops/tablets, interactive board, paper, pens/pencils, and colored pencils.

Key Vocabulary: Production Design (set design, props, costume design, lighting design, projection design, and hair/makeup design), Elements of Design (color, line, texture, shape, texture, form, space, value, and pattern), Overture, and Afrofuturism.

Definitions

- **Production Design:** The process of creating the visual aesthetic and environment for a film, television show, commercial, or other forms of media. It involves creating sets, props, as well as costumes, projections, and other visual elements that help bring the story to life and immerse the audience in the narrative. The Production Designer is responsible for overseeing the creation of these elements, working closely with the director, producers, and other key creatives to ensure that the visual style of the production aligns with the overall vision and tone of the project.
 - **Set Design:** The art and practice of creating the physical environment in a theatrical production, film, television show, or other visual medium. This

includes scenic elements and design layout for sets, lighting, props, and furniture to bring the story or concept to life. It involves arranging these elements in a way that enhances the audience's visual and aesthetic experience. Set design may also involve creating technical elements such as sound systems, special effects, and rigging to support the production. Set designers work closely with other production team members to create a cohesive and visually appealing environment complementing the production's overall vision.

- **Props:** A term commonly used in live performance and film production to refer to objects or items used on stage or on set to enhance the performance or scene. Props can include anything from furniture, decorations, weapons, hand-held objects, and more. Props are used to add realism and detail to a production and help bring the world of the play or film to life for the audience.
- **Costume Design:** The process of creating costumes and outfits for characters in theatre, film, television, or other visual media. It involves researching the time period, setting, and character traits to develop pieces that help bring the character to life. Costume designers work closely with directors, actors, and other production team members to ensure that the costumes accurately reflect the vision of the production. This can involve sourcing or creating garments, accessories, and props, as well as coordinating fittings and alterations. Costume design plays a crucial role in storytelling and character development, helping to enhance the overall visual and emotional impact of a production.
- **Lighting Design:** Refers to the art and practice of creating and controlling the lighting for a performance. This includes designing the placement and intensity of the lights and using different colors and effects to enhance the performance's mood and atmosphere. Lighting designers play a crucial role in enhancing the storytelling and emotional impact of the production, helping to set the stage, highlight performers, create a sense of place and time, and evoke different emotions in the audience. It is an integral part of the overall visual and artistic design of the production.
- **Projection Design:** The art of creating and manipulating projected images and videos to enhance the visual elements of a live event, such as a concert, theater production, dance performance, or installation. It involves using specialized software and hardware to project images, videos, or other visual content onto a surface, such as a screen, wall, or even the audience itself.
- **Hair and Makeup Design:** Refers to the planning and execution of hairstyles and makeup looks for performers and actors. This creative process involves analyzing the characters or themes in the performance, researching historical or cultural references, and designing hair and makeup that enhances the overall aesthetic and storytelling of the production. Hair and makeup designers work closely with directors,

costume designers, and performers to create a cohesive and visually impactful presentation on stage or screen.

- **Elements of Design:** The basic components or building blocks that make up a visual composition. These elements include color, line, shape, texture, form, space, value, and pattern. Each element plays a critical role in creating a successful design and influencing how the viewer perceives and interacts with the artwork. By manipulating and combining these elements, designers can create visually appealing and cohesive compositions that effectively communicate their intended message or evoke a specific emotional response.
 - **Color:** The visual sensation produced by the reflection or absorption of light. Colors can be categorized as primary (red, blue, yellow), secondary (orange, green, purple), or tertiary (colors created by mixing primary and secondary colors).
 - **Line:** The path of a moving point, created by a pencil or brush. Lines can be straight, curved, thick, thin, or dotted, and can be used to create shapes, patterns, and textures.
 - **Shape:** A two-dimensional object with a defined boundary. Shapes can be geometric (such as squares, circles, and triangles) or organic (such as leaves, flowers, and animals).
 - **Texture:** The surface quality of an object, which can be visual or tactile. Textures can be smooth, rough, shiny, matte, or any combination thereof.
 - **Form:** A three-dimensional object that is geometric or free form. Like shape, form has length and width, but also has depth.
 - **Space:** The area around, within, or between objects. Space can be positive (the actual objects in a composition) or negative (the empty or empty areas).
 - **Value:** Refers to the lightness or darkness of a color. It is a critical aspect of visual communication, as it can greatly affect the mood, contrast, and overall aesthetic.
 - **Pattern:** A repeated decorative design or motif. Patterns can be created through the repetition of lines, shapes, colors, or textures.
- **Overture:** A musical composition that is typically played at the beginning of a performance, such as a concert, opera, or ballet. It is usually a short, instrumental piece that sets the story and characters as well as the tone and mood for the rest of the performance. It often includes themes and motifs that will be repeated throughout the opera.
- **Afrofuturism:** A cultural movement that combines science fiction, history, and fantasy to celebrate and reimagine the African diaspora.

Objective(s): At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Respond to the musical and storytelling elements of opera to develop criteria for visual artistic choices.

- Refine an adaptation pitch to demonstrate critical understanding of the visual elements of stage design and opera to tell a story.
- Create visual representations of their set and costume designs based on their opera adaptation pitches.

Assessment: Evaluate the production design questionnaire, which explains the choices in set and costume design visual representations created by each group, looking for evidence of critical thinking, creativity, and their ability to successfully communicate their adaptation pitches.

Assessment Rubric

4: Displays exceptional critical thinking and creativity in set and costume design choices. Clearly and effectively communicates adaptation pitch. Uses at least three elements of design in a highly impactful way.

3: Demonstrates critical thinking and creativity in set and costume design choices. Effectively communicates adaptation pitch. Uses at least three elements of design.

2: Shows some evidence of critical thinking and creativity in set and costume design choices. Partially communicates adaptation pitch. Uses at least two elements of design.

1: Does not demonstrate critical thinking or creativity in set and costume design choices. Does not effectively communicate adaptation pitch. Uses less than three elements of design.

Learning Standards:

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

National Core Arts Standards

VA:Cr1.1.IIa. Use multiple approaches to begin creative endeavors.

VA:Cn10.1.IIIa. Synthesize knowledge of social, cultural, historical, and personal life with art-making approaches to create meaningful works of art or design.

MU:Cn11.O.T.Ia. Demonstrate understanding of relationships between music and the other arts, other disciplines, varied contexts, and daily life.

TH:Re7.1.I.a. Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choice.

TH:Cr1.1.I.a. Apply basic research to construct ideas about the visual composition of a drama/theatre work.

TH:Cr.2-II.a. Refine a dramatic concept to demonstrate a critical understanding of historical and cultural influences of original ideas applied to a drama/theatre work.

Procedure:

Introduction/Hook (5 minutes):

- Begin with a multi-sensory listening activity with a two-minute excerpt of the opera overture or a key musical moment.
 - [X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X – Overture](#)
 - As they listen, ask students to use their senses and invite them to write down any colors, mood, spaces/places, textures, foods, etc. they can associate with the music.
 - Have students share their findings as a class or with partners.
 - An example of a finding could be a student sees the color green which reminds them of the smell of fresh cut grass and the feel of grass under their feet.
 - Ask students to ponder how this all relates to storytelling.

Main Narrative/Sequence (10 minutes):

- Discuss how artistic processes often begin this way and inspiration comes from many different sources, often our own experiences, perspectives, and prior knowledge and research.
- Define Production Design as the visual world of the opera - enhancing the storytelling, context, emotional experience, and communicates mood.
 - Display the elements of production design and definitions, including:
 - Set design, costume design, props, lighting design, projection design, and hair/makeup design.
 - Creative team: collaboration of designers
- Show examples of set designs from the same production of the opera at different opera companies. (Found in presentation slides.)
 - When highlighting the slight variations in design, discuss color, costume, props, sets, location, etc.
- Introduce/define Elements of Design and discuss their use in provided examples.
 - Discussion questions for Slide 21:
 - What elements of Afrofuturism can you spot in these productions?
 - What do you think the director was hoping to accomplish by including elements of Afrofuturism in their production?
 - Do you think the inclusion of the futuristic-looking characters in the Metropolitan Opera production adds or detracts to the storytelling and why?
- Explain we will be curating design ideas for our opera adaptation pitches we created in the Exploring Story Adaptation lesson.
 - Reference this lesson's introductory listening activity and ask students to consider all that was discussed when designing their adaptations: color, mood, textures, spaces/places, etc.

- Students should use at least three elements of design in their work.
- Encourage students to find inspiration through the literary work, opera libretto, and research on their computers and/or tablets, but to be mindful of intellectual property laws.

Activity/Practice (20 minutes):

- Students collaborate to visually represent set designs and costume designs using their opera adaptation pitches. Instructor may choose one pitch for the whole class to adapt or have students work with their group's pitch from the Exploring Story Adaptation lesson.
 - Students break out into their Exploring Story Adaptation lesson groups or may choose to work independently.
 - Pass out groups' previously completed opera adaptation pitch worksheets.
 - Each group or independent student should receive a production design questionnaire to fill out and help guide the process.
 - Students can be assigned designer roles within their groups.
 - Students may use the set design and costume design worksheets to sketch out their designs or create collages using magazine cuts. Students may also choose to engage with the worksheets digitally by adding images.

OR

- Students may use a school district approved AI image creator to craft mood/concept boards.

Present/Share (8 minutes):

- Willing groups share their set and costume design sketches with the class using the questionnaire as a guideline for presentation.

Reflection (2 minutes):

- Ask students to reflect on the process of refining their opera adaptation pitches by developing set and costume designs in collaboration with their group or independently.

Extension/ Follow-up/Next steps:

- Discuss the connections to professions in the opera industry and to other artforms, such as fashion, architecture, etc., and other music genres. Delve deeper into how designers get inspiration – how do they research and find imagery that connects to the storyline.
- Students can take their set and costume designs to the next level and create set models, involving scale, and use recycled materials and fabrics to make costumes.

X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X (1985)

Anthony Davis, composer; Thulani Davis, librettist

X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X premiered in Philadelphia in 1985 with a revised version premiering in 1986 at New York City Opera, has only been produced a handful of times, until recently when The Metropolitan Opera, Seattle Opera, Opera Omaha, and Detroit Opera launched a co-production of this piece all directed by Robert O'Hara. Each company produced a slightly different version of the production to fit their stage. One of the largest variations on this production is the Metropolitan Opera included a chorus of Afrofuturistic characters that framed the action on stage.

The music and libretto of *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* are deeply rooted in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with composer Anthony Davis and librettist Thulani Davis translating Malcolm X's narrative into operatic form. The opera doesn't merely recount events from his life; instead, it distills his psychological, emotional, and ideological journey, giving audiences an immersive experience of his transformation.

Anthony Davis's score blends jazz, blues, and elements of classical opera with African and African American musical traditions. This fusion mirrors the layered identity of Malcolm X himself—an individual shaped by Harlem's vibrant culture, his family's activist legacy, and his experiences with racial injustice. Just as *The Autobiography* traces Malcolm X's ideological evolution, the opera's music reflects different stages of his life. For instance, moments from Malcolm X's early life in Lansing, Michigan, are often set to rhythms that evoke spirituals and African traditions, symbolizing his heritage and the resilience of his ancestors. As Malcolm X evolves from "Detroit Red" to a prominent leader, the music follows suit. The jazz idioms Davis employs in these segments communicate Malcolm X's immersion in urban Black culture, his transformation into an outspoken figure, and his rebellious spirit. Later, as Malcolm X embraces Islam and a more global view on race and social justice, Davis incorporates musical motifs that reflect this broader worldview, utilizing more lyrical, introspective themes.

Each act centers on pivotal events, with dialogues and arias inspired by Malcolm X's own words and the autobiography's intense reflection on his experiences. By condensing complex ideas and life events into poetic language, the libretto captures the philosophical and emotional weight of Malcolm X's journey, giving it both a historical and universal resonance. Malcolm X's powerful arias, often inspired by speeches or inner monologues, create moments of deep introspection, while choruses amplify the collective voices of Black communities impacted by systemic oppression.

Short Synopsis

The opera presents 12 vignettes from the life of Malcolm X, from youth to his death: abject poverty in Depression-era Lansing to adolescence in Boston to Mecca (the site of his pivotal hajj, the traditional Muslim pilgrimage), as well as a number of places in New York City, including a mosque, the streets of Harlem, and, finally, the site of his assassination in 1965, the Audubon Ballroom and West 165th Street.

X: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MALCOLM X OPERA SYNOPSIS

(Anthony Davis, composer; Thulani Davis, librettist)

ACT I

1931, Lansing, Michigan. At the home of Reverend Earl Little and his wife, Louise, a meeting is taking place of the local chapter of Marcus Garvey's Universal Improvement Association, and Rev. Little is late. Louise has been tense all day, and members of the meeting are concerned about active white supremacist groups terrorizing local people. Louise remembers past attacks that haunt her. A policeman arrives to say that Rev. Little was killed in a streetcar accident. The neighbors ponder what may have really happened, and Louise becomes distraught, sings to herself, and soon becomes unreachable. A social worker comes to the home sometime later and declares the Little children to be wards of the state. Malcolm tries to reach his mother, who does not react to him. She is hospitalized. His older half-sister appears to take him to her home in Boston.

About 1940, Boston. Still very much a country boy, Malcolm is introduced to Ella's middle-class black Boston and, through his discovery of the music there, finds himself in the local after-hours life, with his guide, a character named Street. But as a young adult, he gets involved with some people who rob a wealthy home, and he is arrested.

In an interrogation room, Malcolm reveals the anger over the troubles that have long plagued people like him.

ACT II

1946–48. Malcolm broods in jail when his brother Reginald comes to visit. Reginald tells him about Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, whose teachings he thinks will help his brother. Malcolm begins to study the Nation's teachings and read many books. He becomes a serious and more hopeful man. Malcolm X is born. The jail recedes as Malcolm hears and then sees Elijah. It is as if the word removed the bars. They come face to face. Elijah embraces Malcolm like a son. He tells him he has much to learn to spread Allah's word and sends him out to start temples. He is an electrifying speaker.

1954–63. Malcolm begins his ministry, helping to found temples in Boston, Philadelphia, Springfield, Hartford, Atlanta, and New York. This scene spans several years in telescopic fashion. The period includes some of the heights of the civil rights era and closes with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Malcolm is seen speaking on various Harlem street corners as time passes. He always takes the crowd. Malcolm warms to his task when speaking before more and more exuberant crowds and decries some of the peaceful protests in the South as Malcolm defines his own political position.

He leads an anthem declaring "We are a nation." At the end, he is asked about Kennedy's death and makes a remark lacking in sensitivity to the nation's mourning. Elijah is enraged.

Malcolm and Betty briefly discuss his upcoming meeting with Elijah. They express the hope that their children will be free to dream without fear.

ACT III

Malcolm is called to see Elijah, who is both disturbed that this spokesman for the Nation may have put the organization in jeopardy and that he may have become too powerful. Malcolm is disparaged by other Muslims as he comes to the meeting. The Nation is splintering into vying factions. Elijah silences Malcolm for three months, and Malcolm consents to the will of his leader.

He visits with his family, disheartened by the turmoil dividing his community and reporters hounding his every step. Betty hands him a ticket and tells him to go to Mecca, to spend time alone, and find his way. He decides to simply trust in Allah and ask for His help.

Malcolm is in Mecca, dressed in the simple cloths of a hajji and awaiting word as to whether he will be permitted in as a convert and not a man born in Islam. The call to morning prayer sounds, and people there begin to go through the traditional motions of prayer, which are new to him. He watches, imitates the others, and tries to learn the orthodox ritual. He has a larger vision of people across the world united together in faith, rather than by a single ideology.

1964–65. Just before he returns to Harlem, a riot breaks out there. He returns, now a changed man but outwardly the same. He is greeted by reporters who question him about the rioting.

Later, he delivers a speech before his own newly formed group, the Organization of Afro-American Unity. He tells his supporters what he has learned in Africa—that they are a part of a larger movement against colonialism and racism. He is warned of death threats. He is not concerned with the fear so evident around him.

He arrives to give a speech at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem. After greeting his audience, he is gunned down.

Opera synopsis courtesy of Detroit Opera via the Metropolitan Opera.

Key Scenes in Davis' *X: The Life and Times of Malcom X*

Video excerpts and timestamps are pulled from the Metropolitan Opera on Demand.

Performance Date: Nov. 18, 2023

KEY SCENE #1: Act I, Scene 1: A man was on the tracks (Reverend Little is Dead)

Met Opera on Demand: Track #6. Act I: A man was on the tracks (Reverend Little is Dead)

00:00 – 02:43

The police arrive at the Little family home with news that Reverend Little, Malcolm's father, was found dead on the train tracks. A family friend breaks the news to Louise Little.

Libretto Excerpt

MEN

A man was on the tracks.
A streetcar ran him down.
Reverend Little is dead.
He says that Earl was on the tracks.
He says the streetcar ran him down.
A white man cut him down
Some white men cut him down.
They pushed him on the tracks.
These devils hunt us down... like cursed dogs.

LOUISE

The air seems thin and fragile.
In these twilight hours, every light's a fire
Now mine tonight

MEN

They pushed him on the tracks.
Those devils dressed in white
They want to kill us all without a fight
They killed his brothers too.
It could be me or you.
Hung one high in Georgia!
Shot one dead up north.
Murdered one low in the night and Earl tonight.
Some white men cut him down.
They pushed him on the tracks.
These devils hunt us down... like cursed dogs.

KEY SCENE #2: Act II, Scene 2: You are not empty

Met Opera on Demand: Track #16. ACT II: You are not empty

00:00 – 5:45

After studying the Koran and the teachings of the Nation of Islam during his time in prison, Malcolm leaves and meets with the leader of the Nation, Elijah Muhammed. Elijah tells Malcolm to denounce his last name inherited from a history of enslavement and replace it with an X. Thus, Malcom X is born.

Libretto Excerpt

ELIJAH

Malcolm,
who have you been?
Malcolm,
from where do you come?
Why are you so thirsty and worn?
Who would you be?

MALCOLM

I came from a desert
of pain and remorse,
from slavery, exile,
from jail's brute force.

ELIJAH

Who would you be?

MALCOLM

I would just be a man
who knows right and wrong,
who knows the past was stolen away.

ELIJAH

A life we see.
A reason to be.
But who will you be?

MALCOLM

My name means nothing.

ELIJAH

An "X" you must claim.

MALCOLM

My name means I was a slave.

ELIJAH

An “X” you must claim
for what was lost –
your African name,
an ocean crossed.
An “X” will stand
until God returns
to speak a name
that will be yours.
Come, Malcolm X,
let me teach you.
Allahu-Akbar
Allah is the greatest.
Let me teach you.

ELIJAH

As Salaam-Alaikum,
Peace be unto you.

MALCOLM

Wa-Alaikum-Salaam,
and unto you be peace.

KEY SCENE #3: Act III, Scene 4: I have learned so much in Africa

[Met Opera on Demand](#): Track #30. ACT III: I have learned so much in Africa
00:00 – 5:39

Not long before his assassination, Malcolm X speaks to his newly founded Organization of Afro-American Unity. He shares what he learned in Africa—that their struggle connects to a larger, global fight against colonialism and racism. Though he’s warned of threats against his life, Malcolm stands firm, unaffected by the fear surrounding him.

Libretto Excerpt

MALCOLM

I have learned so much in Africa.
We’re apart of something so big,
a movement spanning the globe.
We’re freedom fighters all,
from here to Angola,
Mozambique, Ghana,
Zimbabwe, South Africa.
Chosen, destined by guns to fall...
Ballots or bullets, your call!

**OPERA
AMERICA**

This is not race revolt.
Settlers came, took the ground
from Black, Yellow folks, and Brown.
A global struggle is now on.
The settlers' power will come down.
Human rights for all, not just some!
We have the right to self-defense.
We're done with slavers' crumbs,
promises, and small reforms.
We're sick from deaths of daughters,
from burying our sons.
The world hears our call
in our loss and pain.
We hear them all.
We must aim well for freedom.
Cards teeter and fall.
The house collapses.

REGINALD

Who set the bomb –
destroyed your home?
Men are hunting you down.
Where will you go?

MALCOLM

We've been hunted before
by men who hid in darkness.
There is nowhere to hide.
We do not know
which mask evil wears.
These men don't wear white hoods
but hide on the street in suits.

BETTY

Who set the bomb,
destroyed our home?
Men are hunting you down.
Where can we go?
America is a house of glass.
Anyone can see the violence inside.
Bricks fly to the walls.
The roof shatters.
The Nation is a house of cards.
Men like Malcolm push too far.
Men like Malcolm light the match!

Libretto excerpts courtesy of Seattle Opera.

**OPERA
AMERICA**