

Enriching the Humanities Through Opera

Script for Lesson: 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)

Slide 1:

Today, we're diving into visual storytelling as we continue our exploration of adaptation and the opera *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*.

Slide 2:

Our inquiry is: "How does production and visual design aid in storytelling?" By the end of the lesson, we will be able to: (List off objectives from slide.)

Slide 3:

To start, we're going to listen to the overture/an important musical moment of [title of opera] (pronunciation). I want you to jot down anything that comes to mind while you listen — colors, moods, textures, spaces you imagine. For example, does the music make you visualize the color green, perhaps a vibrant green field or a dark, mysterious forest? Or the smell of fresh cut grass and the feel of grass under your feet.

X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X – Overture

Listen to music.

Who would like to share what came to mind?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Think about how these thoughts relate to storytelling. How does music evoke strong visuals and feelings?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slides 4-10: Review short opera synopsis and key scenes – as much or as little as needed.

Slides 5-6: Key Scene #1

Let's review this key scene. Reverend Little is late for the local meeting of Marcus Garvey's Universal Improvement Association, leaving his wife, Louise, tense and uneasy. She learns Reverend Little has been killed in a so-called streetcar "accident."

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

00:00 – 02:43

Slides 7-8: Key Scene #2

Let's reexamine this key scene. In prison, Malcolm studies the Koran and Nation of Islam teachings. Upon release, he meets with Elijah Muhammad, who urges him to reject his last name, linked to slavery, and adopt "X" instead. This marks the birth of Malcolm X.

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

00:00 – 5:45

Slides 9-10: Key Scene #3

Let's go over this key scene. Just before his assassination, Malcolm X speaks to his Organization of Afro-American Unity, sharing that the fight in Africa is part of a global struggle against colonialism and racism. Aware of the death threats, he remains undaunted, urging unity, courage, and commitment to their shared cause.

Met Opera on Demand: Track #30. ACT III: I have learned so much in Africa

00:00 – 5:39

Slides 11-17:

As we just explored, artistic processes often start with our own experiences and perspectives. Let's explore how this translates into Production Design, shaping the visual world of an opera. This important process enhances storytelling and communicates mood.

Briefly explain the definitions of set design, costume design, props, lighting design, projection design, and hair/makeup design.

Together, these elements create an immersive experience for the audience, helping them feel connected to the story.

Slide 18:

Let's look at a couple of different opera productions. Each creative team brings their own unique interpretation to the story. What do you notice in these costume designs?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slide 19:

What do you notice in these set designs?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Pay attention to the details — consider how the set, costumes, and props working together. What are the ways they play into our understanding?

Provide students space to share their thoughts.

Slide 20:

Designers consider the fundamental elements of color, line, shape, texture, form, space, value, and pattern, etc. to communicate their visions.

Briefly define/review the elements of design found on the slide.

Slide 21:

Now let's look at the elements of design highlighted in these productions. Now let's look at the elements of design highlighted in these productions. Slightly different versions of this production have been designed and one of the largest variations on this production is that the Metropolitan Opera added a chorus of Afrofuturistic characters that framed the action on stage. Afrofuturism is a cultural movement that combines science fiction, history, and fantasy to redefines and celebrates African heritage and culture.

Discussion Questions:

- 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 from the storytelling and why?

What do you notice? How does the use of the element enhance the story?

Analyze the examples on the slide, using the text to direct and enhance the discussion.

Slide 22:

I want us to think about how we can incorporate at least three elements of design into the opera pitch adaptations we created. As we dive into creating designs for our adaptations, remember, we'll be pulling inspiration from the literary work, opera and possibly other sources, but when we do so, we need to keep intellectual property laws and plagiarism in mind – give credit where it is due.

What questions do you have?

Take time to answer any questions students may have.

Slide 23:

Here are examples of a costume design mood/concept board and production photos for another opera, *Pagliacci*. Notice the color palette, textures, patterns in the costumes, and how it communicates time and character.

Analyze the examples on the slide, using the image caption to direct and enhance the discussion.

Slide 24:

Now here's the set design for the same opera. Observe the use of line, space, shapes, textures, patterns, lighting, use of props, color palette, and how it all works together, establishing time period and enhancing the mood, tone, and overall atmosphere of the production.

Analyze the examples on the slide, using the image captions to direct and enhance the discussion.

For a little more inspiration, let's watch the production design process for the hit Broadway musical, *Wicked*.

Discuss findings from video.

Slide 25:

Here are some ways to turn your adaptation pitches into set and costume designs.

Analyze the examples on the slide, using the image captions to direct and enhance the discussion.

The visual components of storytelling are just as powerful as the words and music.

Slide 26:

We will be working in our groups to create set and costume designs based on your opera pitches. Each group will receive a Production Design Questionnaire to fill out that will help guide the process and reasoning behind your choices. We will have 20 minutes to complete the designs and questionnaire.

Take time to answer any questions students may have.

(Pass out each group's opera adaptation pitch worksheets as well as 1 set design, and 1 costume design worksheet per group. Provide them with the production design definitions handout and elements of design definitions handout, if needed.)

****Students may use the set design and costume design worksheets to sketch out ideas or create collages. If a digital approach is preferred, students may use a school district approved AI image creator to craft designs and/or mood/concept boards.**

(Walk around the classroom, offering assistance as students work. Provide a 10-minute, 5-minute, and 2-minute warning).

Slide 27:

Who is ready to share their designs? Groups, please use the questionnaire as a guideline when presenting your set and costume design sketches.

Facilitate the sharing process, encouraging respectful listening and feedback among students.

Slide 28:

As we wrap up, I want us to reflect on today's experience and this entire adaptation process. Consider how you refined your opera adaptation pitches through visual design. What did you learn about storytelling? How has this process shifted your perspective on storytelling and your approach to developing ideas?

Allow a moment for reflection, then invite students to share their thoughts.

Slide 29:

Thank you for your wonderful contributions today and throughout this process!