

ACTING UP
STAGE COMPANY
MODERN • MUSICAL • THEATRE

Falsettos

by William Finn & James Lapine

Producing contemporary musical theatre. Inspiring Toronto audiences.



Study Guide for Students

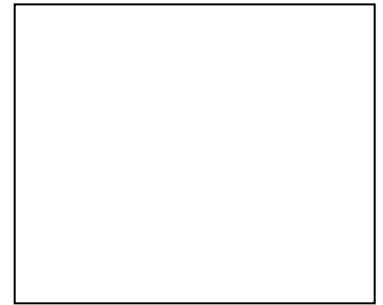
Brief Overview

Study Guide Purpose

This study guide is designed for both teachers and students who will be attending Acting Up Stage Company's production of William Finn's *Falsettos*. This study guide provides information on the show, the creators, the cast, some additional context and explanation, and various drama activities that can be completed to enhance the theatre experience.

Brief Overview of *Falsettos*

Falsettos is set at the beginning of the 1980's. As the sexual revolution comes to a halting close with the appearance of a mysterious disease affecting primarily gay men, the tides of politics, social dynamics and reactionary measures begin to shift in New York and across the continent. Meanwhile, Marvin, a Jewish father, has left his wife and son for another man, but despite his personal attractions is still trying all methods of constructing a 'tight knit family.' As each of the characters enters therapy with Mendel, a psychiatrist, we learn about their hopes, their fears and their attitudes towards this time of significant change.



Told through a series of rapid fire vignettes and heightened theatrical stylization, *Falsettos* remains the most important musical of the AIDS era. Examining not only the specifics surrounding the rise of the epidemic, this profoundly funny and enlightening musical opens up discussions about tolerance, mental health and, most significantly, the nature of family.

History of Acting Up Stage Company

Acting Up Stage incorporated in May 2004 as a not-for-profit organization under the leadership of Mitchell Marcus. The company looks to fill a unique niche in the Toronto theatre scene by producing intimate musicals at reasonable prices from Canadian and international authors that will attract a younger generation of audience members. Acting Up Stage hopes to become a staple company in the Toronto theatre scene, producing a reasonably priced, intimate musical experience that deals with thought-provoking themes and provides a theatrical experience for modern, contemporary audiences.

In 2005 Acting Up Stage produced the Canadian premiere of Jonathan Larson's *tick, tick...BOOM!*, the only show he wrote other than the hit musical *RENT* before his death. Andrew Lippa and Tom Greenwald's *john & jen*, also a Toronto premiere, received rave reviews when it ran in 2006. Since then, Acting Up Stage has produced the Toronto premiere of William Finn's *Elegies: A Song Cycle* in 2007, the Canadian premiere of Terrence McNally, Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens' *A Man of No Importance* in 2008, the Toronto premiere of Benj Pasek and Justin Paul's *Edges: A Song Cycle*, and William Finn's *A New Brain*.

Since *A New Brain*, Acting Up Stage has continued to pervade as an indomitable force in the chamber musical theatre scene. Earning rave reviews and multiple Dora nominations for *The Light in The Piazza*, *Parade* and, most recently, *Caroline, or Change*, Acting Up Stage is proud to tackle this important work from the AIDS era with new vigor and vision.

About *Falsettos*

History of *Falsettos*

March of the Falsettos, a one act musical about a gay man trying to harmonize his wife, son, lover and psychiatrist, opened on May 20, 1981 off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons in New York City. *Falsettoland*, about the same family preparing for the son's Bar Mitzvah and thrown into turmoil with the onset of a mysterious disease, opened at Playwrights Horizons on June 28, 1990. The two shows were combined to create *Falsettos* which opened on Broadway at the John Golden Theatre on April 29, 1992 where it ran for 486 performances,

The original Broadway production was nominated for seven Tony awards, including Best Musical and won two: Best Book of a Musical (William Finn and James Lapine) and Best Original Score (Music & Lyrics by William Finn).

Acting Up Stage produced William Finn and James Lapine's *A New Brain* in 2009, and William Finn's *Elegies* in 2007.

Synopsis

Set in New York City in 1979 (Act 1) and 1981 (Act 2), *Falsettos* focuses Marvin and the people in his life. Marvin has recently divorced his wife, Trina, and left her and their son, Jason, to live with his male lover, Whizzer. Marvin dreams of having a tight-knit family, but he's having trouble actualizing this aspiration.

Told through a series of rapid fire vignettes, we see all the characters reflecting on the changes that are happening in and around themselves. Marvin sees his psychiatrist, Mendel, in order to work through his turbulent on again/off again relationship with Whizzer and the estrangement he feels from Jason. Trina sees Mendel to discuss her failed marriage. Jason sees Mendel to discuss his parents' dysfunctional relationship (and to persuade Mendel to marry Trina, which Mendel eventually does.)

Act 2 begins four years later, and finds a more grown up Jason planning for his Bar Mitzvah and Whizzer starting to display odd symptoms. Planning for a Bar Mitzvah means that Marvin and Trina must reconcile their differences, and Jason must try and figure out which girls he wants to invite. With the help of Charlotte and Cordelia, Marvin's lesbian neighbours, plans for the Bar Mitzvah start coming together. However, when Whizzer collapses from an unknown illness that keeps getting worse, everyone must band together as a family.

Filled with great music, quirky characters, and a baseball game, *Falsettos* is a poignant and funny show that examines what it's like to live, love, and grow up.

Character list

Marvin - Trina's ex-husband and Jason's father

Trina - Marvin's ex-wife and Jason's mother

Jason - Marvin and Trina's son

Whizzer - Marvin's lover

Mendel - Marvin's (and later Trina's and Jason's) psychiatrist

Charlotte - Marvin's neighbour, a doctor

Cordelia - Marvin's neighbour and Charlotte's partner, a caterer

Musical numbers

Act One

- Four Jews in a Room Bitching
- A Tight Knit Family
- Love is Blind
- Thrill of First Love
- Marvin at the Psychiatrist (A Three-Part Mini-Opera)
- Everyone Tells Jason to See a Psychiatrist
- This Had Better Come to a Stop
- I'm Breaking Down
- Please Come to Our House
- Jason's Therapy
- A Marriage Proposal
- Trina's Song
- March of the Falsettos
- Trina's Song (Reprise)
- The Chess Game
- Making a Home
- The Games I Play
- Marvin Hits Trina
- I Never Wanted to Love You
- Father to Son

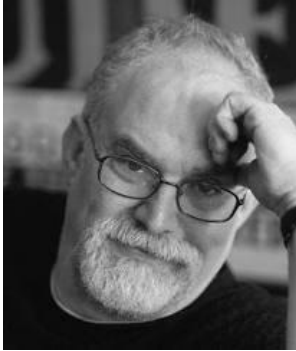
Act Two

- Welcome to Falsettoland
- The Year of the Child
- Miracle of Judaism
- The Baseball Game
- A Day in Falsettoland
- The Fight/Everyone Hates His Parents
- What More Can I Say
- Something Bad Is Happening
- Holding to the Ground
- Days Like This
- Canceling the Bar Mitzvah
- Unlikely Lovers
- Another Miracle of Judaism

- You Gotta Die Sometime
- Jason's Bar Mitzvah
- What Would I Do?

Creators' Bios

William Finn



William Finn is the writer and composer of *Falsettos*, for which he received two Tony Awards, Best Book of a Musical (with James Lapine) and Best Original Score. He has also written and composed *In Trousers*, *March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland* (Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Musical, two Los Angeles Drama Critics Awards, two Drama Desk Awards, the Lucille Lortel Award and Guggenheim Fellowship in Playwriting). Mr. Finn wrote the lyrics to Graciela Daniele's *Tango Apasionado* (music by the great Astor Piazzolla) and, with Michael Starobin, the music to Lapine's version of *The Winter's Tale*. His musical *Romance in Hard Times* was presented at The Public Theater. Recently, he wrote *Painting You for Love's Fire*, a piece commissioned and performed by the Acting Company, based on Shakespeare's sonnets. For television, Mr. Finn provided the music and lyrics for the Ace Award-winning HBO cartoon *Ira Sleeps Over*, *Tom Thumb* and *Thumbelina*, *Pokey Little Puppy's First Christmas* and, with Ellen Fitzhugh, two *Brave Little Toaster* cartoons. Mr. Finn has written for *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *The New Yorker*. A graduate of Williams College, where he was awarded the Hutchinson Fellowship for Musical Composition, Finn now teaches a weekly master class at the NYU Tisch Graduate Program in Musical Theatre Writing. His most recent projects include *Elegies*, *A Song Cycle* (Lincoln Center), *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* which had a three-year run on Broadway and has been produced nationally and all over the world, and the upcoming *Little Miss Sunshine* with James Lapine. For the past four years he has been the Artistic Head of the Musical Theatre Lab at the Barrington Stage Company in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

James Lapine



James Lapine wrote the book for *Falsettos*. He has worked with Stephen Sondheim on *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, and *Passion*. He also recently directed *Merrily We Roll Along* for Encores, and Sondheim on Sondheim for the Roundabout Theatre Company. With William Finn he has worked on *Falsettos*, *A New Brain*, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* and *Little Miss Sunshine*. Other Broadway credits: *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Golden Child* and *Amour*. He has written the plays: *Table Settings*, *Twelve Dreams*, *Luck*, *Pluck & Virtue*, *The Moment When*, *Fran's Bed* and *Mrs. Miller Does Her Thing*. For the NY Shakespeare Festival he has directed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Winter's Tale* and *King Lear*. He has received 11 Tony nominations, winning 3 times. He has also won 5 Drama Desk Awards and the

Pulitzer Prize for Drama for Sunday in the Park with George. He was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 2011. For more information see JamesLapine.com.

AIDS and America in the 1980's

In 1980, cases of small groups of young men suffering from very rare diseases began to be reported from California and New York City. The diseases were a type of cancer called Kaposi's Sarcoma, and a pneumonia called Pneumocystis Pneumonia Carinii (PCP). The reports concerned young white men who had otherwise been quite healthy and suddenly became quite ill; the diseases usually affected people who were either much older, or had significantly compromised immune systems. The one thing that all the men who were involved in the initial reports had in common: they were all gay.

On June 5, 1981 US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) first documented the outbreak in a report called "Pneumocystis Pneumonia – Los Angeles." The report documented the occurrences of homosexual men who were contracting PCP and the little known facts surrounding these cases. Shortly thereafter, *The New York Times* printed an article about 41 gay men who had been diagnosed with Kaposi's Sarcoma. By late 1981, 5-6 cases of the diseases were being reported weekly.

Because the diseases was so closely associated with gay men, the disease gained certain perjorative names in the early stages including GRID (gay-related immune deficiency), 'gay cancer', 'community-acquired immune dysfunction' and 'gay compromise syndrome.' However, by June of 1982, with 20 states reporting cases of the diseases, it became clear that gay men were not the only ones being affected- though many of the heterosexuals who had been infected had confessed to using intravenous drugs.

By September of 1982 it was becoming apparent that AIDS was not only transmitted through homosexual activities, but could also be passed through blood (many patients of blood transfusions who had received blood from gay donors were being diagnosed with the diseases) and the CDC started using the acronym AIDS- Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome- to categorize the conditions. At this time, one or two cases of AIDS were being diagnosed daily: it was quickly becoming an epidemic.

In 1983, the virus that caused AIDS was discovered: Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). By the end of 1983 the number of AIDS diagnoses reported in the USA had risen to 3,064 and of these people 1,292 had died.

Since AIDS was so closely associated with gay men and drug users, it became heavily stigmatized in social relations and politics. At the time, discussions around sexual topics such as gay sex, condoms, and abstinence were incredibly taboo and many organizations were reluctant to print explicit documents detailing ways to help prevent the contracting of AIDS. Under the Reagan government, any non-military programs and policies were receiving major financial cuts; so, funds to start researching AIDS were minimal. In fact, the first time President Reagan spoke publicly about AIDS was on September 17, 1985. On October 3, 1985 actor Rock Hudson was the first high-profile public figure to die of AIDS related illnesses.

In 1986, with the daily diagnosis number continuing to climb, the US Surgeon General issued a report on AIDS. This was the government's first official publication which urged citizens and schools to start discussions on ways to prevent the spread of AIDS. In 1988, after 83,000 cases of AIDS had been diagnosed and over 45,000 AIDS related deaths had had been reported, 107,000,000 copies of a pamphlet entitled "Understanding AIDS" were printed and sent to every home in America.

In 1986, experiments started to show that a cancer drug called AZT (zidovudine) could potentially help slow the attack of HIV. In March 1987 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved AZT as the first antiretroviral drug to be used as a treatment for AIDS. In 1989 a drug trial called ACTG019 showed that AZT could slow progression to AIDS in HIV positive individuals with no symptoms. However, AZT was expensive, costing almost \$7000 for a year's supply. Efforts were made to bring the cost down, but it still proved expensive for many citizens with poor health insurance.

By August of 1989 over 100,000 AIDS cases had been reported to the CDC, these included men and women of all all races, ages, and sexual orientation. The fight to end AIDS had only just begun.

Playing AIDS: A Theatrical History

In the 1980's, plays with explicitly gay characters started to proliferate stages across North America thanks to the popular success of Harvey Fierstein's Torch Song Trilogy. A series of 3 one act comedies about Arthur Beckoff (a Jewish drag queen living in New York City) *Torch Song* opened off-Broadway in 1981 and was a huge success (Fierstein played Arnold alongside co-stars Matthew Broderick and Estelle Getty). On June 10, 1982 Torch Song Trilogy opened on Broadway where it won the Tony award for Best Play and ran 1,222 performances.

On August 21, 1983 La Cage Aux Folles opened on Broadway. The show, about two gay men who own a nightclub, had music and lyrics by Jerry Herman (of *Hello Dolly* fame) and a book by Harvey Fierstein. La Cage Aux Folles was incredibly successful and won the Tony award for best musical, ran for 1,761 performances, had a large national tour, and received two subsequent Broadway revivals.

After the giant success of Torch Song Trilogy and La Cage Aux Folles it was clear that overt homosexuality was no longer taboo in the theatre, and as the spread of HIV and AIDS began to make headlines across America many playwrights began to write plays that dealt with the harsh reality of what their loved ones were going through. Here are a few examples:

The Normal Heart is a largely autobiographical play by Larry Kramer. It focuses on the rise of the HIV-AIDS crisis in New York City between 1981 and 1984, as seen through the eyes of writer/activist Ned Weeks, the gay Jewish-American founder of a prominent HIV advocacy group. After a successful 1985 Off-Broadway production at The Public Theater, the play was revived in Los Angeles and London and again Off-Broadway in 2004. A Broadway debut opened in April 2011 followed by a Dora Award winning production by Studio 180 in Toronto last year. *The Normal Heart* is renowned for its contemporaneous account of the rise of AIDS, and is largely seen as the non-musical theatre counterpart to *Falsettos*.

Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes is the 1993 Pulitzer Prize winning play in two parts by American playwright Tony Kushner. It has been made into both an HBO miniseries and an opera by Peter Eötvös. Broad scoping, *Angels in America* paints a portrait of several prominent characters (both fictional and real) at the height of the epidemic. Using clear dramatic text, and a non linear method of storytelling, *Angels in America* combines the best elements of both *Falsettos* and *The Normal Heart* to depict a time of huge social upheaval and idealistic hope for a future in which this turmoil has been overcome.

Love! Valour! Compassion! is a play by Terrence McNally which no longer addresses AIDS as its core, but rather one of the several aspects of gay life. It premiered at the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1984 and then transferred to Broadway where it ran for 248 performances. The plot revolves around a group of gay men who meet at a summer home just north of New York City. Infidelity, flirtations, soul-searching, AIDS, truth-telling and skinny-dipping mix monumental questions about life and death with a wacky dress rehearsal for *Swan Lake* performed in drag.

RENT is a rock musical with music and lyrics by Jonathan Larson based on Puccini's opera *La Bohème*. It tells the story of a group of impoverished young artists and musicians struggling to survive in New York's Lower East Side in the thriving days of Bohemian Alphabet City, under the shadow of HIV/AIDS. No longer seen as simply a gay-related syndrome, many of the characters in the show are affected in a fitting examination of how encompassing the disease had become by the mid 90s.

Contextualizing *Falsettos*

What is a Bar Mitzvah?

The word *Bar* is derived from the Hebrew word *Ben* which means boy. *Mitzvah* means “a law or commandment”. When the words are put together they mean “a boy who is subject to the commandments and laws.”

When a Jewish male turns 13 he is considered to be part of the religious majority, therefore he is no longer a boy but has become a man. To acknowledge this major transition the Bar Mitzvah is allowed to partake in certain Jewish customs that he had heretofore not been able to participate in, including saying certain prayers and reading from the Torah. Traditionally, the Bar Mitzvah will have an opportunity to perform the prayers and read from the Torah during Sabbath service at his local synagogue with many family and friends in attendance.

Following the synagogue portion, there is often a “seudat mitzvah” a big party and meal to celebrate the Bar Mitzvah. In *Falsettos*, the elaborate planning forcing Marvin and Trina to collaborate is in preparation for the party.

Jewish females often have a Bat Mitzvah when they are 12 with most of the same customs and traditions (though in Orthodox Judaism they are not allowed to read from the Torah).

Glossary

Yiddish Terms

Canadelach - Matzo balls.

Dreck - Rubbish or trash.

Gefilte Fish - A Jewish dish made from a poached mixture of ground boned fish, such as carp, whitefish or pike, which is typically eaten as an appetizer.

Knish - A Jewish snack that consists of a filling covered with dough that is either baked, grilled, or deep fried.

Kosher - Jewish dietary laws.

Rugelach - Jewish pastry.

Torah - The first five books of the Jewish bible, written out on a scroll.

Trayf - Not Kosher.

Tsouris - Trouble and aggravation

Schmo - A stupid or dull person.

Schpiel - A long speech or argument

Other References

Carl Jung - Carl Gustav Jung was a Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist who founded analytical psychology. Jung proposed and developed the concepts of the extroverted and the introverted personality, archetypes, and the collective unconscious. His work has been influential in psychiatry and in the study of religion, literature, and related fields.

Fortissimo - A musical term meaning "very loud."

Hank Greenberg - Henry Benjamin "Hank" Greenberg, nicknamed "Hammerin' Hank" or "The Hebrew Hammer," was an American professional baseball player in the 1930s and 1940s. A first baseman primarily for the Detroit Tigers, Greenberg was one of the premier power hitters of his generation. Greenberg was the first Jewish superstar in American professional sports. He attracted national attention in 1934 when he refused to play baseball on Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, even though the Tigers were in the middle of a pennant race and he was not in practice a religious Jew.

Hepatitis - A swelling and inflammation of the liver. It is not a condition, but is often used to refer to a viral infection of the liver.

Nancy Reagan - Nancy Davis Reagan is the widow of former United States President Ronald Reagan and was First Lady of the United States from 1981 to 1989.

Ronald Reagan - (February 6, 1911 – June 5, 2004) was the 40th President of the United States (1981–89). Prior to that, he was the 33rd Governor of California (1967–75), and a radio, film and television actor. Reagan is known for his extreme Conservatism, in both politics and social views, and his refusal to address AIDS directly in the early years of the epidemic.

Sandy Koufax - was a left-handed pitcher who played his entire Major League Baseball career for the Brooklyn/Los Angeles Dodgers, from 1955 to 1966. He retired at the peak of his career, and at the age of 36 became the youngest player ever elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Koufax is also remembered as one of the outstanding Jewish athletes in American sports. His decision to not pitch Game 1 of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur garnered national attention as an example of conflict between social pressures and personal beliefs.

Sigmund Freud - Born Sigismund Schlomo Freud, was an Austrian neurologist who became known as the founding father of psychoanalysis.

Syphilis - a sexually transmitted infection caused by the spirochete bacterium *Treponema pallidum* subspecies *pallidum*. Syphilis was the most prevalent sexually transmitted disease before the rise of AIDS.

Discussion Questions

Listed here are a number of questions that may be helpful in fostering some discussion after you see the performance, about some of the themes in *Falsettos*.

Questions

1. *Falsettos* is set in New York City between 1979-1981. Divide the class into 4 groups and ask them to research the visual art (including fashion), music, TV and movies, and political figures/movements of New York during the period of the play. Have them present their findings to the rest of the class.
2. Marvin wants to have a “tight-knit family” where everyone accepts each other, is that wishful thinking? Is it possible to have a family where everyone gets along? Discuss the family dynamics in the show- what are the similarities and differences to the students’ family dynamics.
3. In Trina’s Song we hear her sing “I’m tired of all the happy men who rule the world.” In the first act of the show Trina is the only female. Why do you think William Finn chose to do this? Discuss Trina’s role throughout the play. How does she change? Do you think Finn meant “rule **her** world”? How has the position of females in power evolved since this era?
4. The song March of the Falsettos is an ode to, and skewer of, masculine stereotypes. How are the masculine characters defined? Are they stereotypical? Does the show present its gay characters in a stereotypical way? What are some of the stereotypes that gay people face and how have this changed between the 1980s and now?
5. Growing up is discussed a lot throughout the play. The second act focuses on Jason’s Bar Mitzvah where, in the Jewish tradition, he becomes a man. Find a moment in the play where each of the male characters grows up a bit or “becomes a man”. What are some of those moments in your own life?
6. There is very little dialogue in *Falsettos*: most of the show is sung through and sometimes giant passages of time are covered in one number. Why do you think William Finn and James Lapine chose to do this? Is it effective? How does music change the way the story is told?
7. Trina sings “I was sure growing up I would live the life my mother assumed I’d live.” What are the assumptions, wishes, and pressures that our parents place on us? When do we start making decisions on our own and living the lives we want to lead?
8. Some of the earliest AIDS activists and organizations were everyday people and some were celebrities. Here are the names of some of the first people who spoke out about AIDS and made a difference. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to research these figures and discuss their contributions to the fight against AIDS:

Ryan White and the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act; The Gay Men’s Health Crisis Earvin “Magic” Johnson; ACT-UP; Pedro Zamora

Class Exercises

Exercise 1 Life and Art (Keith Haring)

Classes: Visual Art; History; Social Studies; English

Goal: Historical study, Creativity

Keith Haring (May 4, 1958 – February 16, 1990) was an artist and social activist whose work responded to the New York City street culture of the 1980s. Haring died of AIDS related complications, but his artwork was considered so integral to the gay rights movement that one of his images was used as the logo for the Broadway production of Falsettos.

Research the art and style of Keith Haring and use his style to create several images that represent your personal life story. What kind of techniques did he use? How were his subjects personally related to his own story? How can you draw on the same kind of inspiration as Haring did from within your own experiences?





The Games We Play **Exercise 2**

Classes: Drama, English, Visual Arts

Goal: Creating a personal reflection through visual art

In *Falsettos*, Whizzer sings:

“I don’t look for trouble
I do not accept blame
I’ve a good and a bad side
But they’re one and the same
Ask me to arouse you
I will rise and obey
These are the games I play.”

Chess, baseball, and racquetball all figure prominently in the lives of the characters Falsettos. What are the games you play literally and figuratively in your own life? What is the connection between the actual games you like playing and the figurative ones you find happening?

Part A

Have the students decide: “If your life were a board game what would it be and why?” Then, have them list all the rules and instructions for the game.

Part B

Divide the students into groups of 3 or 4 and have them decide on who’s games they think is the most engaging/fun/different. Using art supplies, ask them to craft the game by creating all the elements necessary for play. Then, as a class, take turns playing each others games. Afterwards, discuss what were the prominent similarities and differences between the various games, and how they allowed students to access their own personal life experiences in the playing.

Exercise 3 Sing for Yourself

Classes: Drama, English, Creative Writing

Goal: Creative Writing, Creative Collaboration; Interpreting a text dramatically

Below, is a list of several song titles from *Falsettos*. Let each student pick a title that speaks to them and have them create a poem that fits with the title they have chosen. Divide the class into small groups and have the students share their poems with each other; then, have each group choose one poem that they will share with the class. While one student reads the poem, the rest should be encouraged to rehearse a creative physical presentation to accompany the poem reading. Try to integrate the reader into the creative interpretation of the poem.

Song/Poem titles

Thrill of First Love

This Had Better Come to a Stop

Making a Home

What More Can I Say?

Holding to the Ground

Days like This

What Would I Do?

If any of the groups choose to present poems with the same title what are the similarities between the poems and presentation? What are the differences?

Kosher Catering Exercise 4

Classes: Drama; Music; Dance; Visual Art

Goal: Creatively interpreting a different cultural heritage

Divide the class into small groups and give each one a particular culture that they will represent (i.e. Greek, Jewish, Mexican... etc). The students should then choose, as a team, a certain occasion that they must plan for (a birthday, wedding, newborn baby... etc) which is interesting and relevant to everyone in the group. Have the students research how their designated culture would celebrate that event.

The next day, give each group 15-30 minutes to celebrate a portion of their selected occasion in class. Have them provide everything from the menu, to the music, to the decorations and ask them to perform a song or a dance that might traditionally be performed. The class can then go around, visiting each other's celebrations and should be encouraged to compare their own experiences to this new culturally different ones.