The Nativity
A Congo Square Production

Inspired by Langston Hughes
By McKinley Johnson
Directed by Aaron Todd Douglas

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It was on Dec. 11, 1961, that the first production of *Black Nativity* was performed. The show, written by Langston Hughes, was a celebration of more than just Christmas. *Black Nativity* celebrated what happened in Bethlehem some 2,000 years prior with a distinctly African American flavor, bringing to light not only the story of baby Jesus, but the beauty of gospel music and the genius of Hughes.

The 1961 production debuted at New York City’s 41st Street Theater off-Broadway and ran for 57 performances. Not a traditional Christmas play, this work was suited for the Broadway scene thanks to its unique melding of scripture, verse, music and dance. It featured a completely black cast, comprised of a large gospel choir, soloists, a narrator and, of course, Mary and Joseph. Despite being a well-known agnostic, Hughes’ interest in African American cultural practices and the history of gospel was strong. As such, this multifaceted song-play reflected Hughes’ intrigue in African American spirituality and religious oral traditions. By combining the story of the nativity with a gospel choir, Hughes reflected the Christmas story while also demonstrating the contemporary methods of celebrating it.

Though now well known as *Black Nativity*, the path to this iconic title was not without its hiccups. The original name for this play was *Wasn’t It a Mighty Day?* Alvin Ailey, a blooming choreographer and artistic director, was a part of the original off-Broadway cast with friend and modern dance colleague, Carmen de Lavallade.
Unfortunately, both talented dancers left the show before opening because of the title shift from *Wasn’t it a Mighty Day?* to *Black Nativity*. Both are believed to have left because they felt the use of the word “black” in the title of an off-Broadway play was too controversial a choice, particularly for such a harmonious show.

It was in 1969 that *Black Nativity* found one of its permanent homes. The production was staged by the National Center of Afro-American Artists in Boston, Massachusetts. Since then, the NCAAA has done the production every single year, making it the longest running production of *Black Nativity* in the world! Now *Black Nativity* is a common holiday season production across America. Recurring productions are regularly staged in Washington D.C., Atlanta, Columbus and Chicago—just to name a few. The Intiman Theatre in Seattle celebrates its 12th annual production of *Black Nativity* this Christmas season. Although the spirit remains the same, the modernization of this piece is clear, with Intiman describing the production as follows: “[*Black Nativity*]: Featuring the poetry of Langston Hughes, gravity-defying choreography by Spectrum Dance’s Donald Byrd, Pastor Patrinell Wright and her choir of gospel singers, and that rockin’ live band!”

Modernizations and adaptations of Hughes’ original script are not isolated. This year’s Congo Square production of *The Nativity* represents one such derivation from the original text. Congo Square’s production is, in fact, known for its unique variations. Starting in 2004, Congo Square produced *Black Nativity* at Goodman Theatre, then followed this with another performance of the play in 2005. By 2007, however, Congo Square made some big changes, bringing a global context to *Black Nativity*. Chicago Tribune theater critic Chris Jones describes the production as such: “…they globalized the ‘Black Nativity’ by setting the entire thing in the Darfur region of Western Sudan, introducing a note of geopolitical urgency that was, to my mind, entirely in keeping with the spirit of the Hughes piece.” Since this production, Congo Square has brought in playwright McKinley Johnson to adapt the script again. *The Nativity* first opened at Chicago Center for the Performing Arts and comes back to The Goodman for Christmas 2010. This new production features original songs as well as some very timely references to present-day America.

Although *Black Nativity* is only a 49-year-old show, it has come to be a holiday classic. It showcases a variety of African American arts, with the word of the great Langston Hughes, the history and beauty of gospel and the grace of dance. The classic production continues to be performed in professional theaters, as well as in universities, schools and churches across America. As the legacy of this production grows, it also remains timeless, with theater companies finding new ways to adapt and transform the work to celebrate African American artists and culture today. In the tradition of Hughes, companies such as Congo Square even go so far as to bring light to some of the inequities suffered by people across the globe. Whether you prefer the original work or one of the many new adaptations, there is no question that this production is one that will continue to grow while also remaining a classic.
As a poet, novelist and playwright, Langston Hughes remains one of the most influential African American writers of our time. He was a leading voice in black communities during the 1920s and ‘30s, helping to create a missing narrative in the predominately European American canon. *Black Nativity*, performed in churches, theaters and college campuses in nearly every major city in the United States, is actually not counted among his greatest works. He is mostly known for his work as a poet and essayist.

Hughes was born on Feb. 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. His family included a long line of influential political figures involved in the struggle for African American rights. Hughes’ parents separated just after he was born, and his mother brought him to live first in Kansas, then Illinois and later Ohio. In the midst of his family’s constant moving, he was elected class poet in middle school and high school, showing a promising start to a vibrant literary career. He graduated and published his first major poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” the piece he is perhaps best known for today. He finished this poem en route from Mexico in the same year he was admitted to Columbia University in New York City, under his father’s condition that he study engineering instead of writing. This was a move that would change his life. In New York he met several prominent writers, including W.E.B. DuBois and Countee Cullen, who were already familiar with his work. Impressed, they counted him among their fellow writers as part of the new black cultural movement: the Harlem Renaissance.

After dropping out at the end of only one year at Columbia, Hughes took a job as mess boy on board a ship bound for West Africa and Europe. Afterward he returned to Harlem to take part in the Renaissance before moving to Washington D.C. He continued to write and frequent jazz clubs; the two had a profound influence on each other and the young writer. During his time in the United States and abroad, he published poems in journals such as *The Crisis*, the NAACP journal and the Urban League journal, *Opportunity*. By 1924 he had developed a strong literary reputation and was very well known and well read among primarily black communities. In 1926 he published his first collection of poems, *The Weary Blues*, and enrolled back in college at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. By the time he graduated three years later, he had a second volume of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), in addition to his college degree.
The 1930s were to be one of Hughes’ most transformative decades. Shortly after his graduation, he became heavily involved in politics; many considered him to be a radical. His actions certainly lent to these claims. He wrote for communist journals and other politically Left (liberal) publications. One of his greatest undertakings during the 1930s was the case of the Scottsboro Boys—the alleged gang rape of two white girls by nine black teenage boys on a Southern Railroad freight train—which he explored in a dramatic verse play titled Scottsboro Limited. Thanks to a benefactor with whom he had a close personal relationship, he also was able to write his first novel, Not Without Laughter (1930). During this period he travelled quite a bit, from visiting the Soviet Union with a failed coalition of black writers to trekking around China, Japan, Mexico and Europe. His focus also shifted from the poetry for which he had become so well known to prose fiction and plays.

In 1935, Hughes’ first major play, Mulatto, debuted on Broadway. After briefly serving as a war correspondent in Spain, he returned to America. He established the Harlem Suitcase Theatre as a people’s theatre in 1937 and found its first home in the hall of a leftist labor-cultural order, staying true to his politically liberal beliefs. During World War II he worked as a columnist and became further known for collections of writings and musical plays. His works also showed a popular recurring character named “Jesse B. Simple,” an African American everyman whose adventures became the subject of several books. His first major Broadway musical was the debut of Street Scene in 1947, but more was yet to come.

On Dec. 11, 1961, Black Nativity entered the theatrical world. Originally titled Wasn’t It a Mighty Day?, the play was first produced off Broadway. Hughes achieved even greater success later with the gospel play Tambourines to Glory (1963), a collaborative effort with Jobe Huntley and the first full-length gospel play by an African American artist to appear on Broadway. Both gospel plays prominently feature the use of gospel music and lyrics. The presence and popularity of gospel—and its presence in Hughes’ early life—inspired him to incorporate more of the music into his dramatic writing. He also was aware of the popularity of Gian Carlo Menotti’s Christmas television opera, Amahl and the Night Visitors, and wanted to explore the idea of creative musical retellings of the Nativity story from a new perspective. Rather than write a play featuring a few gospel songs, he would create a Nativity play with gospel music at its heart.

He was a writer who was very interested in the African American oral tradition. Although best known as a poet, Hughes wrote more than 20 plays and other musicals before and after Black Nativity. Emperor of Haiti, Simply Heavenly and Jericho-Jim Crow are a few of his stage works, and his political plays include Scottsboro Limited, Harvest, Angelo Herndon Jones and De Organizer. He also wrote Mule Bone with Zora Neale Hurston. His short story collections include The Ways of White Folks (1934) and the verse collection, Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951).

Hughes died of cancer on May 22, 1967, after one of the most varied and distinguished literary careers of the 20th century. As with other great writers, his legacy remains. His residence at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem, New York, has been given landmark status by the New York City Preservation Commission, and his entire block of East 127th Street was renamed “Langston Hughes Place.” Several additional collections of poems and other works have been published in the decades since his death, and we still come to see Black Nativity each year.

It was in 1930 that prominent African American writers Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes began work on a new comedy, *Mule Bone*. Hurston was a scholar in multiple disciplines, and as a trained anthropologist her literary work was infused with her passion and talent for ethnography. Hughes had a history as a playwright, even though his other literary endeavors often took precedence. It was in the late winter-early spring of 1930 that a Dramatists Guild member, Theresa Helburn, asked Hughes why there were no “real black comedies.” Minstrel shows and black drama were common, but Hughes agreed that a great black comedy play had yet to be written.

It only made sense that Hughes and Hurston would embark on this task together. They were living very near to each other that spring, visiting with one another almost every day as friends and colleagues. When Hughes approached Hurston with the concept of the first black comedy, her background and anthropological knowledge were major benefits to the project. They decided to base their three-act comedy on a folk tale Hurston had collected from her hometown of Eatonville, Florida.

The folk tale involved two quarreling hunters. Both had shot the same wild turkey and wanted to claim ownership over the dead bird. A physical fight ensued. One hunter hit the other over the head with a hock bone from a mule found somewhere on the forest floor, knocking him unconscious. This dispute eventually went to trial at a local church, where the minister cited the bible for his final decision. In a biblical story, Solomon uses the jaw bone of an ass to kill 3,000 Philistines. The minister felt that if Solomon could kill 3,000 with a jaw bone—and a mule becomes more unruly as you move toward his back end—the hock bone most certainly could be considered a “lethal weapon,” and he made good reason to convict the hunter who had knocked the other out.

This folk tale made great fodder for Hurston and Hughes’ new play. It represented a new era of African American theater in which the soul and culture of the south were represented. *Mule Bone* was a derivation of the original folk tale, as it replaced the quarrel over a bird by two hunters with a quarrel over a young lady by two young men. The play also worked in current African American culture, dividing the favor of the townspeople by religion. In *Mule Bone* one young man was Methodist, the other Baptist, adding a new aspect to the story.

The division of labor in crafting the play itself is unclear. It has been said that Hughes crafted some of the story structure, plot and characterization, while Hurston would add important southern dialect as well as details collected from her background in Florida and her ethnographic research. A third party became involved as Hughes and Hurston were worked intensely in the spring of 1930. Louise Thompson, a stenographer, was hired to record the work they dictated. In June of 1930, with the play almost finished, Hurston left New Jersey to return to Florida for the summer. This was the beginning of the end of the collaboration between Hurston and Hughes.
When Hurston arrived back north in the fall, she canceled appointments with Hughes and eventually started ignoring him completely. Hurston scholars point to the blooming friendship between Hughes and the stenographer as the cause for this treatment. Thompson’s role had been elevated to that of a collaborator, a role to which Hurston never agreed and did not feel was necessary. Sadly, these feelings were only expressed after the fallout. Hurston never told Hughes that Thompson’s role was an issue when they were still on speaking terms.

As you can guess, the issues between the two led to more than an incomplete play. In fact, things became worse because of Hurston’s eventual claim to authorship on the work. She first applied for a copyright to *Mule Bone* under only her name, and later submitted the work to the Gilpin Players of Cleveland. This information made it back to Hughes, who became livid with Hurston’s claim to ownership. In future conversation, Hurston would claim the role of the jaded partner, citing the fact that Hughes wanted to make Thompson a business manager and pay her more than a usual typist would be paid. Hurston also had the backing of prominent literary patron Mrs. Rufus Osgood Mason, giving her even more reason and financial backing to fight against Hughes for rights.

Despite the Gilpin Players interest in the work, the play would not be produced any time soon. In 1931, after many months of fighting over ownership, Hurston and Hughes agreed to meet and work out the last bits of the play so it could see the stage in Cleveland. Upon arrival, however, Hurston was told that Thompson had been staying with Hughes just days prior, and she became quite angry. Letters between Hughes and Hurston make it clear that this was not just a debate over a play but how Hurston was treated as a friend and how slighted she felt by Hughes’ attachment to Thompson.

The drama surrounding this comedy caused the Gilpin Players to eventually opt out of the play, especially after the attempted meeting of Hughes and Hurston in Cleveland. There was simply too much controversy and uncertainty to push forward with the new work. *Mule Bone* did, eventually, see the stage in 1991. The Lincoln Center Theatre, New York, opened *Mule Bone* on Jan. 20 and closed it on April 14. Sadly, the reviews were not stellar, and the play has never been produced again. Though it was only a blip in theater history, it forever shook the friendship of two of the greatest African American writers to date.
The Harlem Renaissance

BY WILLIAM LANDON

It’s impossible to gain a full appreciation for Langston Hughes’ impact on the literary world without an understanding of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance—named for its origins in the predominantly black Harlem neighborhood of New York City—occurred in the early 1920s. It was an explosion of black culture, literature, art and music, and many of the most prolific black writers of the early 20th century were directly involved.

The Renaissance, or cultural rebirth, was not defined by common literary style or political ideology, but it included visual arts as well as poetry, essays, fiction and drama. Black visual artists produced works in sculpture, painting, graphic design and printmaking. Still other artists produced theater and music in jazz, blues and spirituals. Despite the lack of a unified voice, all of its artists were committed to truthful artistic expression of the African American experience. Some of the most famous writers to come out of the Renaissance were Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Jessie Fauset, Gwendolyn Bennett, Claude McKay and the renowned W.E.B. DuBois. Many of these artists wrote poetry and plays as well as fiction and articles. The movement’s artists often met at each others’ homes and collaborated on various written, visual and musical projects. According to philosopher Alain Locke, this was the manifestation of the coming of age of the “New Negro.”

The effects of the Harlem Renaissance continued into the Great Depression. The Depression saw another wave of black literacy and expression throughout the country, partly because of the artistic need to express the immense struggles of black Americans during this time. During the Depression, about half of all black families relied on government aid. Many African American writers and artists such as Richard Wright, Willard Motley, William Attaway, Frank Davis and Margaret Burroughs offered nuanced impressions of black urban life, and Gwendolyn Brooks gave a poetic voice to everyday black Chicagoans.

As mentioned before, the explosion of musical styles characterized the Renaissance as much as its visual arts and writing. Some of the most notable contributions of the movement include the proliferation of jazz through such musicians as Duke Ellington and Count Basie. Jazz and blues were popular among both blacks and whites across almost the entire country, but one musical genre can be attributed entirely to Chicago: Gospel.
Gospel music plays a large role in Langston Hughes’ work. *Black Nativity* and *Tambourines to Glory* were written for the stage to allow for a celebration of all the gospel music Hughes included within the text. Gospel’s origins as a musical form can be traced back to the “Negro spirituals” and work songs of oppressed African American slaves in the late 18th century through the 19th century.

Black spirituals and work songs, while very religious and based heavily in Biblical texts, usually had a double meaning. They combined themes of a Christian belief in life after death and the idea of Heaven with the longing for freedom from slavery and segregation. Originally, the worship service was one of the few places white “masters” could openly monitor slaves—and no more than a few slaves were allowed to gather at once without white supervision. As a result, black slaves often attended worship with the masters. Through their attendance of church services, many slaves grew in their understanding of the role music played in their spirituality and relationship to their circumstances. Through a process of adaptation and reappropriation of the traditional white themes, black slaves created new versions of classic hymns. These were influenced by New World Christian practices as well as musical traditions from various African heritages. Much of this they did through secret “camp meetings”—illegal large gatherings done outside of a church service in which participants interpreted hymns in a way that made the music relevant to them personally. Group hymns were characterized by physicality—clapping, dancing and other body movements were just as important as the singing—and involved participants standing in large circles or groups. Thus black spirituals were born.

One of the characteristic elements of black spirituals was call and response, in which the congregation or choir offered a musical reply to something sung by the choral leader. In this style, beliefs were reinforced through direct participation—if the recipient of a musical call agreed with the message, he or she would give an enthusiastic response. This tradition has carried through to today and is still a defining musical characteristic of gospel.

During the Civil War, as the wartime climate directly affected the lives of slaves, themes of escape and
freedom became even more determined in black spirituals. Many claim that some of these spirituals made use of coded messages for runaway slaves. After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, black interpretations of religious music became so popular that white Christians adopted some of their music.

As the musical form developed, new African American colleges were economically unable and unwilling to adopt many aspects of the Euro American worship music, namely organs and hymn books. These were not only financially unavailable, but symbols of white attempts at “civilizing.” Black students and musicians developed the music through choral arrangements and the use of physical percussion and an a cappella style. It wasn’t until later that instruments were introduced—drums, piano and guitar among them. Other instruments, such as the electric organ, were later introduced in modern gospel.

Modern gospel music as we know it was created and popularized in Chicago, the unofficial “Home of Gospel Music.” In the first half of the 20th century, great changes brought gospel music out of the churches and to the country at-large. Thomas A. Dorsey, a Chicago jazz musician, receives much of the credit for popularizing and giving the form a contemporary vibe. Born in Georgia in 1899, he was torn between religious and secular pursuits from an early age. He was introduced to blues and jazz music through the black community and vaudeville theater, and he became passionate about them. Dorsey moved to Chicago during World War I and joined the Pilgrim Baptist Church on the South Side. His musical career took off. After studying at the Chicago College of Composition and Arranging, he began to play in speakeasies and other venues around the city with other jazz and blues musicians, including the famous Ma Rainey and her band. But Pilgrim Baptist would come to serve as his most important musical venue.

Dorsey became widely known for his skills as a pianist and singer. In the process, however, he pushed himself too far. After a return home and a series of nervous breakdowns, he turned his attention to religious music. His music was unwelcome in most mainstream churches, and it was after he lost both his wife and son to childbirth that he turned to the piano and began writing the music that would reinvent the form. He felt that his religious music came to him from God. He co-founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses and later teamed with Mahalia Jackson, Sam Cooke, James Cleveland, Roberta Martin and others to usher in what became known as the “Golden Age of Gospel Music.” Mahalia Jackson had plenty of her own accomplishments independent of Dorsey, including being designated as the first gospel singer to host and star in her first CBS radio program and singing prior to Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech. Pilgrim Baptist Church served as their Chicago home, nurturing their careers and providing support as well as musical resources. As Dorsey was named the Father of Modern Gospel Music, Jackson was dubbed the World’s Greatest Gospel Singer.

Their accomplishments inspired black musicians all over the city and the nation. In the following decades, other gospel musicians and gospel ensembles began to appear and travel around the country. Black performers were broadcast on radio throughout the ’40s and ’50s, and retained a prominence in black Pentecostal and Baptist churches. Despite hardships suffered by many gospel singers, gospel grew to influence soul, Motown of the ’60s and ’70s, and music of religious services for white and black Americans alike.
What action occurs without a word? Fox trot, boogie, swing, flamenco, salsa, free style, jazz, tap, step, hip-hop, ballet—no matter the name, the five letters remain the same: dance. Born of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes’ *Black Nativity* showcases a trinity of performing arts that highlights the beauty of language, voice and, perhaps most distinctly, the elegance and freedom of movement. Central to the story in Congo Square’s production, Mary and Joseph refrain from speech, yet the two narrate volumes through breathtaking choreography. Many may wonder why Hughes chose to deliberately mix in these silent characters into his otherwise verbally vivid world. The answer lies in the history of this gospel play.

In the framework of religious practices, dance goes with gospel as kites go with string. Historically, rarely is one medium found without the other. Dance in this context, sometimes referred to as Praise Dance, shares a parallel history with modern gospel. Many of the traditional dance movements came to be during the worship services on plantations in the antebellum (pre-Civil War) south. These dance movements, linking back to African storytelling traditions, brought an enriching and inspiring facet to the already powerful gospel lyrics. In the same vein as the songs that spoke of freedom and strength in perseverance, the dances embodied both rebellion and a strengthening of community. For example, the practice of stomping out a rhythm took the place of traditional drums, which slave owners banned. The power of community was also present in these dances, as many incorporated all of the members of a worship service. Even in the face of adversity, these dances kept alive storytelling traditions while also rejuvenating and inspiring those living without their freedom.

Years after the abolishment of slavery, 1920s America was still a European-centric hub for mediums artistic, literary and otherwise. The Harlem Renaissance brought forth a vibrant presence of the African American community in poetry, literature, song and dance. Hughes, a figurehead of this time, incorporated into *Black Nativity* the practice of what was already a living element of this blossoming artistic movement. Like other aspects of the Harlem Renaissance, dance held its own unique space as a blend of African, European and classical styles. This bold new art form, with a history steeped in tradition of spirituals and revivals, was again a source of inspiration and a method to administer social change.

In *Black Nativity*, Hughes masterfully weaves in a silence that speaks beyond language. Modern adaptations, such as Congo Squares’ *The Nativity*, retain this element of dance. Similarly to other updated references in the text, the choreography for Mary and Joseph alters from performance to performance. For instance, Joseph’s blend of modern and gymnastic style movements in ‘You Didn’t Wait’ are unique to this Congo Square production. Other productions will highlight different forms of choreography, usually in relation to the background of the choreographer and dancers. Despite changes, the movements of these characters remain striking and add another layer of storytelling onto the already rich spoken and sung text. Modern gospel likewise retains versions of Praise Dance. Step dance, or Stepping, functions as a dance paired to today’s gospel. Some may shout for joy, others will belt out a melody, but in this production of *The Nativity*, celebration may require no words at all.
The Real Nativity
BY WILLIAM LANDON

After seeing this adaptation of Langston Hughes’ gospel musical Black Nativity, you may wonder just how many modern references and characters were really supposed to be there. You may reason, for instance, that hotels and credit scores could not have possibly existed during the actual time of Jesus’ birth. Congo Square’s The Nativity is a perfect example of modern adaptation from a classic text. The Nativity story, as it appears in the Christian Bible, is a very different tale from the one that Congo Square presents.

It is important to look at the story of the Nativity, or the birth of Jesus, from both a Christian perspective and a non-Christian one. Christians believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God sent to redeem humanity. Although this tenet is familiar to Christians, others may not know that it is the central focus of the religious Christmas celebration and the guiding principle of the Christian religion. Jesus’ birth is described in the Gospels, or the first four books of the New Testament in the Christian Bible, which describe the life of Jesus Christ. It is from these four books that the musical genre “gospel” gets its name. The story of Jesus’ birth only actually appears in two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke, and is told slightly differently in each. The one that is most commonly accepted and told is the Gospel according to Luke.

As the story begins, Mary, a young woman, and Joseph, a carpenter, are engaged to be married. Before the wedding, an angel named Gabriel appears to her and tells her with great celebration that she will become pregnant with the son of God, who will become king. She asks how this could be possible, and the angel explains that God will do so through his power and because of this her son will be holy (blessed by God). When Joseph finds out, he initially believes Mary has been unfaithful to him and plans to quietly send her away. Covering all of his bases, though, God sends another angel to deliver the same news to Joseph. Neither is sure how to handle this news. It is announced that the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus (then in control of the region of Syria and Judea, where the story takes place and what is now modern-day Israel), is about to conduct a census of the region. This meant that all citizens had to travel to their “ancestral towns” to be taxed as citizens of the Roman Empire. As Joseph is a descendent of King David, he and Mary must travel to David’s ancestral home of Bethlehem. Mary, now far along in her pregnancy, goes into labor upon their arrival. Joseph attempts to find room at an inn, but he soon finds that all the rooms are booked as a result of the census. He and Mary are forced to find shelter in a manger (stable or barn). While there, Mary gives birth to Jesus. She wraps the baby snugly in cloth and lays him in the hay.

While all of this has been going on, angels have appeared to nearby shepherds and three foreign Wise Men (this detail actually appears in the Gospel of Matthew, not Luke) to inform them of the birth of the Christ child in the city of Bethlehem. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the Three Wise Men (also known as the Three Kings, or the Magi) travel to Bethlehem bringing gifts for the child. Word had spread quickly that...
this child, born in a stable, is to be the new King David (Jesus’ lineage). Word eventually reaches Herod, the local king. He quickly becomes worried that this child will one day steal his throne and secretly calls the Three Wise Men. He asks them to visit the child, then report back to him so he also may go and pay homage. The Wise Men, like the shepherds, are guided to Bethlehem by the Star of Bethlehem (also only found in Matthew), an extremely bright star shining over the city and Jesus’ birthplace. Once there, they give their gifts to the newborn child and, along with others in attendance, pay tribute. God warns the Wise Men to not return to Herod, so they all depart for their home countries by a different path. The story isn’t over yet, though. Herod issues a death sentence for all newborn children in an effort to find and kill the baby Jesus. This order becomes known as the Slaughter of the Innocents. God visits Joseph in a dream and tells him to flee with his family to Egypt to avoid Herod. While Herod’s campaign is brutal, he quickly dies of a serious disease. After the death of Herod, Mary and Joseph return to Judea and settle in the small town of Nazareth, in Galilee, where it is prophesized Jesus will grow up.

This story has been told every Christmas in Christian churches for thousands of years, and the details may differ among Catholics, Protestants, Mormons and Orthodox. To many non-Christian traditions such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, the story of the Annunciation and the Nativity may serve as an interesting tale and cultural folklore. It is important to recognize that even though they may not follow the “savior” theme of the Nativity story, or all of the details, most major religions recognize Jesus Christ as a prophet. As such, they are familiar with him as an important spiritual guide while not placing him in the role of Messiah. Jews read the Torah, which is very similar to the Old Testament text of the Bible. They might not find the same spiritual significance in the Nativity story, but they are still aware of its context. Jesus was Jewish, after all.

To many, the Nativity story represents real events. In Bethlehem—modern-day Israel—a church has been built on the site of the Grotto of the Nativity, which is thought to be the location of the original manger. Christians come from all over the world to see it. So many attend, in fact, that on Christmas Eve many have to watch a live broadcast of the Roman Midnight Mass from nearby Manger Square.

Archaeologists—who study physical material left behind by past human cultures—have looked for evidence of the real-world happenings of the Nativity story to get a better sense of its factual elements as well.
as the culture of the people in Jesus’ time. Some have even tried to find out what, exactly, killed King Herod (it’s now been determined that the cause was chronic kidney failure). These real-life details give many parts of the story a different perspective and can provide evidence against or for the story as we know it today—a blending of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. For instance, many argue about the premise of Joseph and Mary going to be “taxed.” Taxed, during this time, did not mean to give money to the government, but rather to be “written off” or recorded. At this time, the young couple would have had to travel to Bethlehem, as it was the ancestral home of Joseph’s bloodline—census takers didn’t go door to door in that time. Archaeologists also have contributed to finding the proposed site of the original manger. Much of the information we have about the Nativity story events comes from eyewitness accounts of real people from the time. It was an interesting period in which Roman and Judean cultural traditions blended. Without this clash of cultures, the Nativity story could have been completely different!

For non-Christians, an understanding of the Nativity story provides a clear context for many Christian cultural traditions and a foundation of Christian beliefs. To Catholic Christians, especially, the Nativity serves as the centerpiece for Christmas Eve services and symbols used in holiday decorations. It also provides the basis for the Christian practice of gift-giving on the holiday. Although many practices associated with Christmas—like the Christmas tree or winter festivities—actually come from pagan practices, understanding the spiritual foundation of the Nativity allows those who honor the secular Christmas to understand hidden meaning beneath the activities of a major international celebration. Many of our modern holiday practices stem from European traditions but also directly from the Nativity, and we may not realize it—especially if you are not Christian and choose to celebrate Christmas. Here are some examples:

**Candle-lighting:** Around Christmas, you may notice people keep candles in their windows. Whether electric or with a real flame, these candles have their origin in the Nativity. The thought is that the candle symbolizes warmth and hospitality, but even more importantly that it serves as a beacon for the Virgin Mary and Joseph. It welcomes them in to the home, offering a place to stay when there is no room at the inn. This varies from country to country. In America we use electric candles, in Europe people may light real ones and in countries such as India the flame comes from a clay pot filled with oil.

**Gift-giving:** The origins of our tradition of giving presents on Christmas stems from several different sources. Gift-giving has its origins in the Roman New Year, which took place in the winter and celebrated Myrtras, the god of light. It also comes from the life of St. Nicholas, a real priest in Asia Minor, who was renowned for his generosity and kindness to children, often giving them candy and gifts. St. Nicholas is actually the basis for our modern Santa Claus. Victorian England’s revival of Christmas also made the practice of gift-giving to friends and family highly popular. From a religious perspective, though, gift-giving is meant to remind Christians of the gifts that the Three Magi brought to the baby Jesus. Since Jesus can’t directly receive physical gifts from anyone, regardless of faith or religion, gifts may be given as a symbol of goodwill and tribute.

**Advent Calendars:** If you’ve ever received a cardboard calendar holding a chocolate candy for each day of December in hidden compartments, you have the Nativity to thank. This little tradition has become so far removed from Christianity in America that many Christian children are totally unaware of its purpose. The calendar is based on Advent, or essentially the countdown to Jesus’ birth that starts four Sundays before Christmas. To simplify things, the calendar uses the month of December. In church services, candles also are used to count down Advent, with each candle representing one Sunday.

To many Christians, the Nativity is the most important story in the Bible. So Christmas, even without all the flair and gift-giving, is still an event full of holiday cheer. Whether you are Christian or follow any other faith, you can see some Christmas traditions a little differently with a knowledge of the Nativity story and the culture it influences.
Reading Your Ticket

As a patron of the theatre, it is important to know how to read your ticket and find your seat. Generally, seats for all performances in the Goodman’s Albert Theatre are assigned seating, so be sure to know how to be able to find your seat. When you come with your school, you will be ushered to a section where you and your fellow students can sit and enjoy the play together.

Below is a seating chart— a map of all the seats in the Albert Theater — and an explanation of how to read your ticket. If you have any problems, ask an usher for help. They’re here for you!

This will guide you to the lobby door closest to your seat — aisle numbers are on plaques that hang above the doors to the theater.

Play you are seeing and its author

The section of the theatre you will be sitting in: Main Floor or Mezzanine

This is your seat number, located on the edge of the bottom seat cushion.

The row where your seat is located, noted in a letter on the side of the end seat of each row.

Day and date of performance

Curtain time

Goodman’s Albert Theatre

Albert Ivar Goodman Theatre—Main Floor

Albert Ivar Goodman Theatre—Mezzanine

Stage
Theatre Etiquette
With Artistic Director Robert Falls

What should I wear?
Definitely dress nicely but comfortably; try business casual. No tank tops, ripped jeans, etc. Baseball caps or hats must be moved once you enter the theatre. The Goodman is air-conditioned so be sure to bring an extra sweater or dress warmly.

What should I bring?
Only what you really need. Electronic devices such as PSP, Nintendo DS, smart phones, and laser pointers are not permitted during the show. If it makes noise or is distracting, please refrain from having it out in the theatre. A purse, bag, or backpack is fine. School supplies are not necessary. Remember that you are here to sit back, watch and enjoy, so don’t bring anything you don’t need.

(Please remember):
No smoking, and no eating or drinking while inside the theatre.

What if I need to leave the theatre during the show?
Only if it is an emergency. Otherwise, it’s very disrespectful. Make sure to use restrooms before the show, or wait until intermission.

Have respect for other audience members. This means no talking during the performance, no feet on seats, and no kicking. (For your safety and others’!)
**How should I respond to what's going on on the stage?**

Honestly but appropriately. If you find something funny, then laugh—but don’t laugh for five minutes straight or laugh so hard that you need to leave the theatre. Theatre is very different from watching a movie at home. Always remember that you are in a room full of people who are there to watch the performance. They can hear your responses just as well as you can hear theirs. Most important, the actors can hear and see you. They will appreciate any appropriate feed back but might be extremely offended if it is inappropriate. Whether you enjoy the play or not, you owe respect to the actors for having given it a try.

**What to do during intermission:**

Most plays have a 15 minute intermission. This gives you time to stretch your legs, walk, use the restroom, get water and discuss the play with your friends.

We do ask that if you are sitting on the main floor that you remain downstairs and if you are sitting in the mezzanine that you remain upstairs. There are restrooms on both floors. When intermission is over, the lights in the lobby will flash several times; that is your cue to get back to your seat because the performance is about to begin!

**What to do after the show:**

There will be a post-show discussion immediately following the performance. Members of the cast will come out on stage and answer your questions. Feel free to ask anything that's on your mind about the show, but please remember to be respectful.

**What to do before the show:**

When your class arrives, your teacher will let the Education staff know how many people are in your group. It is a good idea to arrive at least 15-20 minutes before the performance.

**If you are late,** often you will not be allowed to enter the show until after intermission.

Once your group is called, an usher will lead you to your seats and hand you a program.

Please promptly sit where you have been assigned. Remember that the show needs to begin on time and everyone needs to be seated.

**And remember the Golden Rule of Theatre-going:**

**Theatre artists are paid professionals.**

When you enter a theatre, you are entering their work space. Respect their work as you would have them respect yours.

**Enjoy the Show!**
After you have seen the show and discussed your responses in the classroom, it's time to let us know what you thought! Your response letter plays an important role at Goodman Theatre. All of the letters we receive are forwarded to our artists, and you may get a response!

Pick one of the artists involved with Candide whose work was particularly memorable to you—an actor, designer, the playwright or the director—and write that artist a letter describing your experience at the show and your feedback about his or her work. Be honest and ask any questions that are on your mind.

Send us your letter within one month of seeing the show, and we’ll forward it on to that artist!

Here is a great student letter we received in response to Animal Crackers last season:

Dear Cast and Crew,

I would have to say that every single one of you have done a superb job in this play. All the effort you have put forth into this play has resulted in a memorable experience for all of us. I thought it was clever that the actors, actresses and the orchestra interacted with the audience. From viewing the original film of Animal Crackers, I think the cast played in the play and the original cast of Animal Crackers very similar! This play might have been the first encounter of the Marx brothers for many teenagers and children and I believe that the crew and cast of Animal Crackers proved that early comedy can also be entertaining and memorable!

The director’s vision of the play was a rather conscious one. Exposing the Marx brothers to the vast majority of people who never knew about them and bringing back nostalgic memories to the older audience was a great idea. This play was actually my first play and a first trip to Goodman Theatre. I myself, as a young adult, finally realized that plays are enjoyable and gratifying. The play had all the elements of emotion and slapstick comedy which made it a great one. The technical aspects as well as the props were amazingly set to follow each scene. My favorite scene had to be the scene where Harpo and Rivelli tried to clear up the misunderstanding of “The Flash.” I though the script was very flowing and comfortable. Was there any improv involved? I did not find any negative aspects of this play. I have found the play and the ambiance of Goodman Theatre very positive. I give Animal Crackers two thumbs up.

Sincerely,
A CPS student

Send your letters to:
Education and Community Engagement
Goodman Theatre
170 North Dearborn Street
Chicago, IL 60601
Or email us at: education@goodmantheatre.org

Goodman Theatre’s Education & Community Engagement is also online! Check us out on Facebook:
http://www.facebook.com/goodmaned
Or Twitter:
http://twitter.com/GoodmanEd
Or on our blog at:
http://education.goodmantheatre.org/blog/

We love hearing your thoughts, so don’t be afraid to drop us a line, comment, tag us in a note, @reply, or retweet us. Also check out our online educational resources for more information regarding the play you’ve seen, or anything else you’d like to know about how our programs (and theatre!) work.

Keep checking in for updates!