RE-MIXING SHAKESPEARE

Curriculum for Documentary Film
Romeo is Bleeding

1st Edition
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Curriculum for documentary film *Romeo is Bleeding*

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Re-Mixing Shakespeare: Curriculum for Documentary Film *Romeo is Bleeding*  
First edition: © 2016 ROMEO IS BLEEDING, Curriculum created by Blueshift
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Re-mixing Shakespeare

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE FILM: ROMEO IS BLEEDING

As the nation wrestles with policing methods, racial profiling and curbing gun violence, Romeo is Bleeding shows viewers a world where the arts offer a powerful alternative and safe social space to face these challenges. The full length documentary film follows one year in the life of Donté Clark, a young man and Spoken-word artist and poet from Richmond, California as he leads a cast of high school students from a local arts program to re-write and perform an adaptation of Romeo and Juliet. Rather than perform the classic text, these students use Shakespeare as a mirror of their own community’s long standing turf war between North and Central Richmond - a city contending with years of turf violence, lack of economic prosperity, trauma and loss. Using their own words, and through their own lens, the students create and perform a new play titled Té’s Harmony that delves deep into the complex socio-economic, cultural and historical issues driving the violence in their community and affecting their everyday health and safety. Their journey is a reminder of the importance of developing and supporting the voices of youth and allowing art to stand as an outlet of self-expression, a tool for youth empowerment and social change, and an inspiration in a community facing ongoing violent conflict.

ABOUT THE CURRICULUM: RE-MIXING SHAKESPEARE

The wrap-around curriculum supporting the documentary film Romeo is Bleeding was initially conceived for courses reading Shakespeare’s classic tragedy Romeo and Juliet. This objective remains a priority with the integration of core topics and skills applicable in English Language Arts courses. The film team soon realized the timeless and universal themes within the plays and film were also rich for other disciplines seeking to address current issues of privilege, power, education, community violence, poverty, trauma, loss, reconciliation and forgiveness. The entire project also offers educators a tremendous opportunity to reflect upon their own classroom practices while highlighting the important role arts and artists have played in social movements across time.

There are ample curriculums written to support educators in their teaching of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. We hope you discover in the three pathways created for Re-mixing Shakespeare something different, uniquely current and engaging for students to connect the past to their present lives and be inspired by the work and voices of students from Richmond, California. Each pathway is guided by the following questions:

- How can literature from the past connect to my life today?
- How can creating art be a tool for understanding and empowerment?
- How can art address racism, oppression and disparity?
BEFORE VIEWING THE FILM

LETTER FROM FILMMAKERS:
JASON ZELDES AND MICHAEL KLEIN

During the process of making *Romeo is Bleeding*, we learned an incredible amount from Donté and the students of Richmond Artists with Talent, or RAW Talent (since the making of the film, RAW Talent has merged to become the performing arts program of the RYSE Youth Center). We watched for months as the students adapted a centuries-old-text in an effort to understand their world and their place in it. We witnessed a vulnerability in their words and performances that required a level of bravery we had never seen before. Living and working alongside RAW Talent, we realized the power of self expression - and the volume with which you can speak when you're side by side with your friends and you really mean what you're saying.

When we saw Donté perform the finale of Té's *Harmony* on stage for the first time, it was clear that his city - Richmond, CA - was starving for this kind of expression. Richmond, and cities nationwide just like it, are eager to reclaim and reshape their narrative, and who better than the youth to lead the charge? As RAW Talent has proven, there is a huge opportunity to take the passion behind the violence that plays out in the streets and channel it into something beautiful like music, dance, or poetry.

Channeling lived experiences into cathartic expression is what this curriculum is all about. Whether it’s to grieve for the loss of a loved one, or to express the Shakespearean agonies of being a teenager, these pages are meant as a tool to allow oneself to tap into their inner voice and interact with their world in a healthy and communicative way.

Watching Donté and RAW Talent develop Té’s *Harmony* helped us to believe in our voice and the value of telling our own stories, and we hope that this can be the same kind of experience for students far and wide. Soak in the movie, feel the emotions, find your fiercest method of communication, and tell your story loudly - because the world is ready to hear you.
FOR THE EDUCATOR

Many students may wonder why they read the works of Shakespeare or how his writings are relevant to their lives today. Donté Clark, the protagonist in the film *Romeo is Bleeding* said:

> The first time I read *Romeo and Juliet* I was probably 15 or 16 in high school and it didn’t really make sense to me. I didn’t understand the language, different words had different meaning back then and it didn’t seem like it had anything to do with me or my life. I didn’t give two craps about it. Now that I am 22 I realized it isn’t just about love, it’s about my life. This is what is going on in my community-racism, hatred, exploitation. We don’t see it as a star-crossed lovers situation. I wanted to tell this story. Why are our “families” at odds?

The *Re-Mixing Shakespeare* curriculum asks students to reflect deeply on Donté’s perspective and engage in exercises that inspire and develop their voices in relationship to their community, their neighborhood, family and school. Three pieces of content are the foundation for this curriculum - Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the modern adaptation of this play Té’s *Harmony* and the documentary film of their process, *Romeo is Bleeding*. The film asks students to situate themselves in the experience of reading Shakespeare for the first time and reflect upon Donté’s experience and context of alienation and confusion. Alongside lessons directly applicable to the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet*, the curriculum draws inspiration from the young artists in the film who individually and in community find new meaning in the classical text while navigating issues such as poverty, community violence, loss and trauma alongside love, friendship, and the hope found through the process of self-expression and creating art.

Several priorities underlie the curriculum’s development. The first is to disseminate an accessible and relevant classroom curriculum deepening student engagement with the timeless themes within Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. By pairing the richness of the classical text with a contemporary adaptation educators are offered an invaluable opportunity to stimulate student engagement as they wrestle with a challenging text. The resources also cross multiple disciplines strengthening units within Social Studies, Sociology, Art, Theatre and more. As the young artists shared their lives and wisdom through the film, we gain insight to the capacity for art and storytelling to bridge time and setting and empower all students, young and old, to carry their voice and their imagination to their communities in new, meaningful and creative ways.

*For purposes of organization, the curriculum is outlined into three discipline pathways: INTERDISCIPLINARY/MEDIA STUDIES, ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS, and SOCIAL STUDIES.*

INTERDISCIPLINARY/MEDIA STUDIES PATHWAY

With the prevalence of media in our students lives, this interdisciplinary pathway offers educators the opportunity to deeply engage in media literacy and textual analysis of a full documentary film. The two lessons and activities included in this section support ELA and Social Studies units. These lessons are well suited for higher level ELA courses including AP English Literature and Composition, Film or Media Studies as well as supporting any Social Studies unit using contemporary media and social issues.
ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS PATHWAY

Because of the many opportunities for learning in an ELA classroom, this pathway is grouped into several flexible but distinct strands.

- **Strand One: Classic Text, Modern Interpretation: Teaching Romeo and Juliet with Té’s Harmony and Romeo is Bleeding.** For ELA units reading Romeo and Juliet.
- **Strand Two: Capturing our Lived Experiences - Teaching Social Justice Literature, Spoken-word poetry and Community Theatre.** For ELA units seeking to use Spoken-word poetry and performance.
- **Strand Three: Community Theatre.** For ELA units writing scripts and performing community theatre.

**Duration and Assessment:** Because it requires time for students to engage deeply with Shakespeare, connect to the universal themes through a modern adaptation and view excerpts of documentary film chronicling this process, it is difficult to assign accurate class periods for each lesson with the range and variety of course schedules that exist today. For this reason, it may be helpful to envision the ELA strands within Re-mixing Shakespeare with the following duration and assessment options in mind:

- **Strand One: An eight week, Portfolio based unit.** If you do cover all lessons in the ELA Strands, several writing assignments are included to assess student learning. Students can also include a series of self-reflections and peer-reviews from their reading of Romeo and Juliet and comparing selected scenes from Té’s Harmony, or reflections from the documentary Romeo is Bleeding.
- **Strand One: A six week, Analytical Essay based unit.** This includes a full reading of Romeo and Juliet, comparing selected scenes to Té’s Harmony, and viewing excerpts from the documentary Romeo is Bleeding. Following a reading and analysis of the three different texts, students will respond to assigned writing prompts with an analytical essay comparing and contrasting the classical text to its modern adaptation.
- **Strand Two:** Following a reading and analysis of these texts, students will create, practice and perform their Spoken-word poem. The final assessment will be portfolio of the final drafts of their writing exercises and their final Spoken-word poem. (Geared for Strand One)
- **Strand Three:** Have students write a review of the performance they create based on the scenes or play they write. They could also keep an actor’s journal that charts their process and shows evidence of self-assessment.

SOCIAL STUDIES PATHWAY

Like Shakespeare, Donté Clark and the young artists in Richmond write and create art within their historical and cultural context. While one priority of the Re-mixing Shakespeare curriculum is to connect students to a classical text in new and meaningful ways, the film also amplifies the critical circumstances over time that gave rise to the turf wars plaguing Richmond and so many other communities.
The suite of lessons included in the Social Studies pathway can be used as stand alone lessons or integrated into the ELA units. As in each curriculum it is difficult to assign accurate class periods for each lesson with the range and variety of course schedules that exist today. Because of the interdisciplinary connections within the film, it may be helpful to envision integrating the Social Studies lessons with the already existing units in mind:

- American History unit on the Great Migration;
- American History unit on Industrialization in the United States;
- American History unit on the Civil Rights movement;
- Economics unit/California History unit: examining the legacy and history of industrial development in Northern California.
- Media literacy unit examining how to “read” documentary film as texts.
- Sociology or Contemporary Social Issues courses including:
  - Environmental studies;
  - Law enforcement, police brutality, criminalization and murder of young men of color and “community policing model;”
  - School to prison pipeline, mass incarceration and the privatization of prisons;
  - Gender stereotyping and objectification-examining young women of color
  - Race and urban planning-understanding the policy and legacy of redlining, law enforcement policy related to zip codes and poverty.

NATIONAL STANDARDS

To fulfill current expectations of the national standards, Re-mixing Shakespeare is aligned to the following Common Core State Standards for 9th and 10th grade English Language Arts and 9th and 10th grade Literacy in History/Social Studies. The full text of standards is included in Appendix I.

- Reading: Literature-Key Ideas and Details: CCSS ELA-Literacy RI 9-10.1 and 9-10.2
- Reading: Literature - Craft and Structure: CCSS ELA-Literacy RL 9-10.3 through RI.9 - 10.7 and RI.9 -10.9
- Writing: Text Types and Purposes: CCSS ELA-Literacy W.9-10.3
- Language: Conventions of Standard English: L.9-10.1 through L.9 10.6

Each lesson includes the following elements:

Objective: Short overview of the goals of the lesson

Guiding Questions: Big picture questions that frame the overall lesson.

Opener: A brief entry exercise to the topics or themes covered in the lesson.

Focus of Study: Primary activity for student inquiry and investigation. Included in this section may be direct references to Romeo and Juliet, Té’s Harmony and Romeo is Bleeding.

Writing Exercises: Suggestions for student demonstration of understanding and skills that may be later chosen for student portfolio.