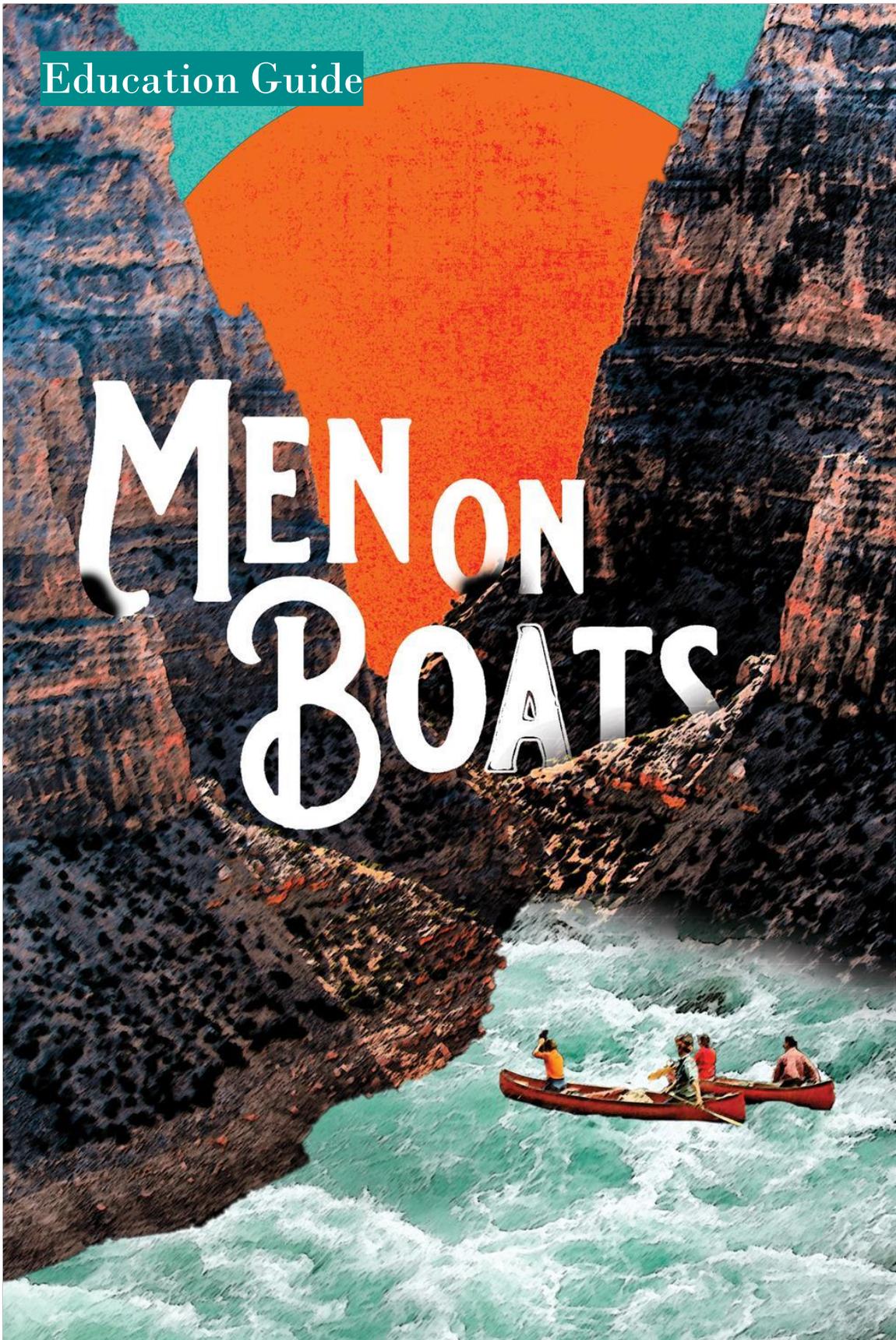


Education Guide



MEN ON BOATS

Villanova University Theatre Department
Education Guide for

Men on Boats

By Jaclyn Backhaus
Directed by Kristy Dodson
September 22 – October 2, 2022

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How to Use This Guide

This Education Guide is intended to help guide and inspire conversation, reflection and further research connected to Villanova Theatre’s production of *Men on Boats*, by Jaclyn Backhaus. It contains a series of prompts and topics for discussion organized around the work itself, Villanova Theatre’s production concept, and broader themes. They are designed to be used in any order and can be approached as singular topics for reflection or in combination with one another to support a more nuanced conversation about identity, culture and inclusion.

About *Men on Boats*

Ten explorers. Four boats. One Grand Canyon. This is the true(ish) history of an 1869 expedition, when a one-armed captain and a motley crew of loyal volunteers set out to chart the course of the Colorado River. Inspired by actual travel logs, Backhaus's nimble and ingenious script is provocative, laugh-out-loud theatre, performed by a diverse cast of non-male actors who infuse America's historic myths of male conquest with a sly blast of satire.



Content Disclosure

Content warnings are [“verbal or written notices that precede potentially sensitive content.”](#) Content warnings differ from spoilers because they don't explain plot or context. Like a rating on a movie or TV show, content warnings give the audience a heads up about potentially triggering topics in the performance. We hope that providing the following content warnings will equip our audiences with the tools they need to engage with the performance in a meaningful and fulfilling way.

Like all good art, *Men on Boats* asks audiences to engage with universal questions on a personal, sometimes challenging level.

At the same time, please do note that there is a difference between trauma and discomfort. Without the latter, we can narrow and limit our experiences in ways detrimental to ourselves as individuals and as members of this community. Please use your best judgment and exercise self-care as needed.

Content warnings provided below.

Men on Boats by Jaclyn Backhaus engages with the following: ableism, erasure of Indigenous cultures. There are gunshot sound effects used in one scene. There are rattlesnake sound effects used in one scene. Loud river rapid sound effects are pervasive. Some flashing lights sequences or patterns may affect photosensitive viewers. The play includes profanity and depicts alcohol consumption, smoking and vomiting.

Meet the Playwright



Jaclyn Backhaus (she/her) is a playwright, educator, arts facilitator, and mother. Her plays include *Wives* (Playwrights Horizons), *India Pale Ale* (2018 Horton Foote Prize, Manhattan Theatre Club), and *Men on Boats* (Clubbed Thumb, Playwrights Horizons). She is one of five Creative Directors of the process-based arts facilitation group Fresh Ground Pepper, and she is one of the fourteen members of the current cohort of The Kilroys, a bicoastal collective that celebrates women, trans, and nonbinary presence in the American theater landscape.

She is a Lincoln Center Playwright-in-Residence, and she was once a 2016 Tow Playwright Resident with Clubbed Thumb. She got a BFA from NYU, where she now teaches some skill sets of playwriting to brilliant students. She resides in Ridgewood, Queens, with her husband Andrew J. Scoville, a theater director, and their son Ernie. Currently, she is writing nothing and reading everything. (newdramatists.org/Jaclyn-backhaus)

Meet the Director

Kristy Dodson's (they/them) work has been seen and developed at many noted artistic institutions: Lincoln Center Theater, Dansearena Nord, The Public Theater, The McCarter Theater, Clubbed Thumb, The Lark Play Development Center, among others. They were awarded the Zwick Award in Directing and was the first Artward Bound awardee to receive a group residency. They were the Assistant Director for the World Premier of *Have You Seen Us* by the legendary Athol Fugard starring Sam Waterston. They were invited to Lincoln Center as one of six emerging directors from around the world to develop a new play; *The Hollower* by Liza Birkenmeier.



As the founding Artistic Director of Overturn Theatre, they produced and created a myriad of live performances for over 10 years, including: 7 new theatrical works with NY premieres, 2 reimaged classics, over a dozen project developments, concerts, installations, galleries, and have commissioned hundreds of artists from countless mediums to create new works in area of live performance. Their education work has spanned from universities to community centers to district 75 schools, from private coaching for professional actors, to professional development training for fellow educators, to intergenerational collaborations with elders, to work with immigrant communities, to underserved youth facilities, to the Little People of America National Conventions. (www.kristy-dodson.com/about)

Topics for Discussion

Westward Expansion



Between the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, half a million settlers journeyed the Great Plains and crossed the Rocky Mountains. Manifest destiny was a widespread (but not universally held) 19th-century cultural belief that the United States was destined to expand across the North American continent. The land was far from empty. Populations of Indigenous people had stewarded the Great Plains, the Rocky Mountains, and the Southwest for generations before the European colonization of the North American continent. The influx of settlers was effectively unnegotiated annexation of ancestral lands and hunting territories. Furthermore, settlers attempted to force European agricultural development on lands that were not suited to such development.

The lands surrounding the Grand Canyon include unceded ancestral territories of the Shoshone, Crow, and Arapaho People (in present-day Wyoming) and the Ute, Havasupai, Hopi, Hualapai, Southern Paiute, Navajo, Zuni, and Yavapai-Apache People (in present-day Utah and Arizona). In the Hopi language, the Grand Canyon is called *Öntupqa*, and it represents the point of passage to the afterlife. The Colorado River was called *Pahawep* by the Ute people and *Hakatai* by the Havasupai people.

Prompts

- How does this information challenge or confirm what you know (or think you know) about Westward Expansion?
- Think about the meeting of cultures, the results of that tension, and the patterns of white American culture overcoming native ones with force. Where do you see this happen in your life? Where else in our society? Where does this happen in the play? Where do you see patterns of community and cohabitation instead?
- What is the power of a name, especially the name of a place? Why might it be important to you to have something named after you? What is the point of naming something? Most of the buildings at Villanova are named after people - how did they get it named? Why might it be a good thing to change something's name?

Metatheatre

While *Men on Boats* recounts real historical events, it is not a realism play – it does not try to realistically reconstruct a river voyage onstage or present events “as they really happened” in the way a documentary would. Rather, it does so in a *metatheatrical* style, meaning that it draws attention to its nature as a play or a performance. Put another way, a metatheatrical play not only *knows* it’s a play, but employs any number of devices to let the audience know this, too. Metatheatrical devices include direct address to the audience, acknowledgement that the people onstage are actors and not the characters they are playing, and elements that make it difficult for audiences to suspend their disbelief.



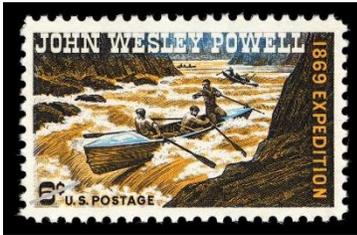
One device used in this production of *Men on Boats* is “breaking the fourth wall.” Imagine a traditional stage, with three walls around the back and sides of the playing space and the fourth invisible wall between the stage and the audience. Instead of this format, the Courtyard Theatre at the Mullen Performing Arts Center is set up as a “thrust” stage, with the audience around three sides of the stage. Furthermore, the actors enter and exit the stage through the audience, and they speak directly to the audience to introduce themselves as their characters at the start of the play. Other metatheatrical devices in this production include references to acting conventions and theatre etiquette, voiceover narrations, and the framing device of a museum exhibit incorporated into the scenic design and the lobby display.

Prompts

- Why might a playwright choose metatheatre over realism for a history play? What impact does this stylistic choice have on your understanding of the broader themes of the play?
- Throughout the play, theatrical elements like lighting, sound effects, music, props, and scenery are progressively taken away, leaving the characters on an all but bare and silent stage by the play's end. How do these design choices impact your experience of the narrative? What effect does it have on your understanding of the themes of the play?
- What other works of theatre, film, TV or literature can you think of that use metatheatrical devices? What impact does this have on your experience of the story?

Historical Media

The Man, The Myth, The Legend



The Powell Geographic Expedition of 1869 has been the subject of a great number of articles, books, documentaries, exhibits, and productions. Historical narratives have framed the expedition in stirring language, with praise for Powell's resilience and strong leadership despite the challenges of his circumstances. The towering image of this heroic figure is hard not to like – but of course, Powell was a human, as were those who would publish and promote his story. Even the official published account of the expedition - *The Exploration of The Colorado River and Its Canyons* - which was used as a primary source by the vast majority of subsequent contemporary retellings, was not a direct reproduction of Powell's journals and field notes. Instead, it was a compilation of his original writings from two separate trips, letters from himself and his brother Walter to various Chicago newspapers, observations from companions on the 1871-72 expedition, and amendments of his own creation. Meanwhile, correspondence and journals from other members of the expedition that were critical of Powell's skill and leadership, and some which even directly contradicted his version of events, were omitted from the official publication.

Prompts

- What other kinds of historical media have you engaged with? What stories did they tell?
- What styles did they adopt – documentary, historical fiction, comedy, musical, etc.? How reliable did they make their history feel? How did the style of the piece impact how seriously you engaged with the content?
- In many ways, Powell was a character upon which history has overlaid qualities and features to benefit their narratives. Why does this happen to famous historical figures? Who benefits? What are the consequences?

Who Writes History?

In an earlier draft of the play, the Ute characters referenced by Powell actually make an appearance on stage and have a conversation with Powell and his men. When Backhaus realized that the only source she had for that dialogue came from Powell and not from the Ute people themselves, she edited the scene. In the version being produced by Villanova Theatre, the Ute characters are only talked about by other actors; they do not physically appear on stage.



Prompts

- If you were the playwright, would you have kept this original scene? Why?
- Where else do you see questions about “who writes history” being asked? Who has the right to tell stories about other people's experiences?

Additional Resources

Hannah Deprey-Severance's Dramaturgy website: <https://vutdmenonboats.weebly.com>

Villanova Theatre Department: <http://villanovatheatre.org>

National Park Service: <https://www.nps.gov/grca/learn/historyculture>

United States Geological Survey: <https://www.usgs.gov/news/jw-powells-perilous-river-expedition>

PBS/The American Experience - *Lost in the Grand Canyon* film:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HG03C5_6_hE

On Campus Resources

University Counseling Center: (610) 519-4050

Center for Access, Success and Achievement (CASA): casa@villanova.edu

Villanova Public Safety: 610-519-4444

Residence Life: Your R.A. / 610-519-4154

Villanova EthicsPoint

EthicsPoint is an anonymous reporting tool for wrongdoing on campus and is available online or via phone: 855-236-1443

VU Pride and OASIS

LGBTQ+ ally groups on campus where all are welcome. OASIS is a confidential group for the LGBTQ+ student community: vupride@villanova.edu and oasis@villanova.edu

Villanova Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Phone: (610) 519-5719, Email: diversity@villanova.edu