

2013 Suggestions for Teaching *The Unfortunates* by Jon Beavers, Casey Hurt, Ian Merrigan, and Ramiz Monsef, with additional material by Kristoffer Diaz

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the history of the Irish folksong “The Unfortunate Rake” and how it has been adapted over time. Versions include: “St. James’ Infirmary,” “Young Sailor Cut Down in his Prime,” “The Bad Girl’s Lament,” and “Streets of Laredo.” These and other websites provide information:

http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/folkways/FWo3805.pdf

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._James_Infirmary_Blues

[http://www.informatik.uni-](http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/lloyd/songs/theunfortunaterake.html)

[hamburg.de/~zierke/lloyd/songs/theunfortunaterake.html](http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/lloyd/songs/theunfortunaterake.html)

2. Research Americana Music and its influences. What genres of music come together to create this uniquely American sound? These and other websites provide information:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americana_\(music\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americana_(music))

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Americana_Music_Association

<http://www.rockmusictimeline.com/>

3. Research the Vaudevillian and Burlesque performance styles. What are their origins and how have the styles evolved over time?

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaudeville>

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~mao2/easton/vaudeville/vaudevillmain.html>

<http://www.datehookup.com/content-the-history-of-burlesque.htm>

4. What are the stylistic qualities of comic book art? What might the artists be trying to say with the exaggerated features of their characters? How do these larger than life characters help to tell the stories of good versus evil or heroes versus villains?

<http://www.rcharvey.com/comart.html>

<http://www.creativebloq.com/illustration/top-10-comic-book-artists-712389>

<http://ghostlypineapples.wordpress.com/top-principles-for-comic-book-artists-to-know-about-comic-design/>

5. Research the history of gambling in the United States. There are three major waves of legalized gambling that are associated with either wartime, frontier lifestyle, or the Great Depression. What about war, adventure, or financial depression could encourage a gambling lifestyle? These and other websites can provide information:

<http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/97/03/chapt2.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gambling_in_the_United_States

6. Research the history of the dice game, Craps. Early on in its evolution it was called Hazard. Define the word hazard. Why might this game of chance have such a name and why could it have changed over time?

<http://homepage.ntlworld.com/dice-play/CrapsHazardHistory.htm>

7. What is gallows humor? How can humor in the face of death act as a kind of medicine?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallows_humor

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/09/110926151735.htm>

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/2011/humor-as-weapon-shield-and-psychological-salve/>

8. Research the definition and symbolism of the rook from its definition of a chess piece, to the bird of the crow family, or a verb. These and other websites can provide information:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rook_\(bird\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rook_(bird))

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/8181233.stm>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rook_\(chess\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rook_(chess))

9. Director, Shana, Cooper, found inspiration in an essay written by Boston Conservatory professor, Karl Paulnak. Read the essay and ask yourself the following questions: What is it about music that can heal in times of pain or struggle? What are other moments in history when music has been important to the healing of a people in need? These and other websites provide information:

http://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/centers/boisi/pdf/sog1/Welcome_address_to_freshman_at_Boston_Conservatory.pdf

<http://www.westernfolklife.org/Deep-West-Radio-Documentaries/prison-songs.html>
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005677>
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=126557553>
<http://www.music.ucsb.edu/projects/musicandpolitics/archive/2007-1/fackler.html>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Songs_of_the_Underground_Railroad
<http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/01/24/using-music-to-lift-depressions-veil/>

Resources

Powell, Eric (2003). *The Goon, Volume 1: Nothin' But Misery*.

Cab Calloway singing "The St. James Infirmary Blues:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzcpUdBw7gs>

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on Americana music, Burlesque, Vaudeville and comic book art. What kind of world do these diverse elements create? What does that tell us about the character of Joe?
2. Joe, the last soldier alive in the prison camp, creates a world of fantasy in order to escape from his current reality. Why? What does he get from his fantasy? What does he learn? What does he achieve? How does the fantasy world help him face the last moments of his life?
3. Refer to your research on rooks. How does the definition of a rook as a bird apply to the characters of the Rooks in the play? How does the definition of rook as a piece on a chess board or the verb to rook apply?
4. What elements of comic book art did you see incorporated into the design of the fantasy world of *The Unfortunates*? Why does Rae have no arms? Why does Joe have huge, closed fists? Why does the doctor have abnormally long arms? What is significant about extreme extremities in the world of the play? What characters have extreme personality traits? In what ways are those extreme traits manifested?

5. Refer to your research on the multiple adaptations of “The Unfortunate Rake.” How does this adaptation differ from those that came before it? Write your own version of “The Unfortunate Rake.”
6. Refer to your research on the history of Craps and Hazard. What are the hazards Joe faces when he gambles? How does his life change with a simple roll of the dice?
7. What relation do the characters from the war-torn reality world have to the characters they play in the fantasy world of St. James Infirmary?
8. The women of *The Unfortunates* only exist in the fantasy world. How do their characters differ from the men who appear in both the reality and fantasy worlds?
9. Discuss the theme of protection that runs through the play. Who protects whom? What are the consequences when the protector fails?
10. Discuss the moment when Joe’s fists finally open. What change does it represent in him? What does the moment mean to the other characters in the play? What other characters transform in a similar symbolic way? How do they change and what does the change signify?

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