Sheryl Craig, editor of the Jane Austen Society of North America newsletter, notes that “...as Jane Austen was writing *Sense and Sensibility*, Britons were experiencing ... the economic results of a harvest failure of biblical plague proportions. Everyone in Britain was affected by the disaster... it was a financial reversal every bit as devastating as the Dashwoods’ loss of their father’s income.”

There had been a hot and rainless summer in 1794, and the dry weather continued through a bitterly cold winter. The natural world was trying to recover when devastating cold weather in May and June of 1795 killed off almost all of the newly planted crops.

The wealthy felt the pinch, while the poor starved, causing massive food riots throughout England, but also an unprecedented outpouring of donations to private charities on the part of some (although certainly not all) landowners.

This is the economic and environmental climate in which Austen places her suddenly homeless and in need of assistance Dashwood family.

**Marianne’s behavior**

Many of the customs and mores of Jane Austen’s time seem absurdly formal and rigid to us today. In particular, look at how Marianne’s behavior toward Willoughby causes shock and dismay. She calls him by his first name! She takes carriage rides with him, alone! She writes to him! In Marianne’s society, none of these things are acceptable unless the couple is firmly engaged, which she then refuses to disclose! Austen’s world can seem foreign to us, and yet there is so much about human nature that has not changed, so much that we do recognize in the humanity of her characters.

**Jane Austen**

Jane Austen was born in Hampshire, England in 1775. Her father was a minister, serving parishes in Hampshire until he retired in 1800 and moved the family to Bath. He died in 1805, and the family eventually moved to Chawton in the south of England. Jane never married and remained at home with her mother and sister for her entire life. *Sense and Sensibility* was the first of her novels to be published, in 1811. In 1817, she contracted an unknown illness, and moved into a house in the nearby city of Winchester to be close to her doctor. She died a few days later at the age of 41. She is buried in the north aisle of Winchester Cathedral.
Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the life and work of Jane Austen. What were some of the main events in Jane Austen's life? What are some of the major themes in her work? What were some of the impressions Jane Austen had of the society in which she lived? These and other websites provide information:
   - http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/janelife.html#life1a
   - http://www.jasna.org/info/about_austen.html
   - http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/austenbio.html

2. Research playwright Kate Hamill and her adaptations of Jane Austen. These and other websites provide information:
   - www.kate-hamill.com/about/
   - www.youtube.com/watch?v=4z9Xe2-DMNw
   - www.youtube.com/watch?v=fg0sZrqoVbl

3. Sense and Sensibility was published in 1811, during the Regency Era in England (roughly between 1790 and 1837.) This era is also referred to as "The Age of Elegance." What intellectual, social and artistic occurrences were taking place about that time? This and other web sites provide information:
   - www.britainexpress.com/History/George_III.htm

4. Research the roles of upper-class men and women during the Regency Era. How did women obtain status? How did men? What behavior was expected of a lady? Of a gentleman? These and other websites provide information:
   - https://www.janeausten.co.uk/a-ladys-education/

5. Research marriage and marriage law during the Regency Era in England. How important was it to be married legally? What was at stake? What options were available to women who remained unmarried? These and other websites provide information:
   - http://visitvictorianengland.blogspot.com/2014/05/the-perils-of-breach-of-promise-to.html
   - http://mural.uv.es/asacel/womanReg.html

6. To what extent do first impressions influence your assessment of another person? How do you judge someone when you first meet him or her? In your opinion, what are some things that help to make a good first impression? What are some things that make a bad first impression? To what extent do you allow other people's first impressions (either good or bad) to influence you? Why or why not are first impressions always accurate or reliable?

7. After being introduced to society, an event known as "coming out," young women were allowed to be courted by men. Research the process of coming out and courtship. This and other websites provide information:

8. Research inheritance law for British gentry in England in the 19th century. Define entailment and primogeniture. These and other websites provide information:

9. Find all possible definitions of the words “sense” and “sensibility.” What are the differences between the two words?

10. Research the 18th-century literary and intellectual movement known as the cult of sensibility. These and other websites provide information:

Other Resources

Books
- Sense and Sensibility, Jane Austen
- Our Tempestuous Day, A History of Regency England, Carolly Erickson
- Jane Austen: The World of Her Novels, Deirdre Le Faye
- Jane Austen and the Theatre, Penny Gay

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on Jane Austen and Kate Hamill. After seeing the play, how does the theatricality of the adaptation contribute to the story of Sense and Sensibility? What role do the gossips play in the adaptation? In what ways do they add to the understanding of the story? What do they tell us about the world of the play?

2. Refer to your research on the cult of sensibility. What is Jane Austen saying about this 18th-century fad in Sense and Sensibility?

3. Refer to your research on the Regency Era. How much of the story is a specific reflection of its time and place? Which aspects of the story would not happen in our world today? Which aspects still hold true?

4. Refer to your research on Jane Austen's life. What parallels do you see between Jane Austen's life and the story of Sense and Sensibility?

5. Refer to your research on primogeniture and entailment. Why are the Dashwoods forced to leave Norland Park and live without the benefit of their husband's/father's estate?

6. Refer to your research on marriage in Regency England. What is the marital dynamic between John and Fanny Dashwood? Who legally controls the family finances, and
who is in actual control? Why does John Dashwood decide not to heed his father's request to give financial aid to the women? What reasons does Fanny put forward to influence his decision?

7. Refer to your research on courting and marriage in Regency England. Why doesn't Edward simply break his engagement to Lucy Steele? What does he stand to lose? Why doesn't Edward tell Elinor that he is engaged? What might he be trying to accomplish by delaying?

8. Refer to your research on the meanings of “sense” and “sensibility.” Given that Elinor and Marianne are the protagonists of the story, which one represents sense and which sensibility? In what ways are the journeys of Elinor and Marianne similar? In what ways do their temperaments make them respond differently? What is the significance of the title?

9. Which other characters exhibit good sense in the play, and when? What other characters are ruled by their sensibilities and when? When does sense produce positive results? When is sensibility a good thing?

10. Compare and contrast the sibling relationships in the play: Elinor and Marianne, Lucy and Anne, Edward and Robert. Despite their differences, to what extent is Elinor and Marianne's relationship based on mutual affection and trust? Lucy and Anne's? Edward and Robert's?

11. Elinor asks Marianne to “be composed, and do not betray what you feel to everybody present!” To what extent is this good advice? To what extent is it not? What is the effect of “not betraying what you feel” on Elinor? Brandon? Edward? Others?

12. Refer to your answers to the questions on first impressions. What is the impulsive, sensibility-prone Marianne's first impression of Willoughby? Of Colonel Brandon? Of Edward? How do her opinions change by the end of the play? In what ways, if any, were her first impressions accurate?

13. In what way does the issue of appearances vs reality impact the story? What sort of man does Willoughby appear to be? What sin does Colonel Brandon appear to have committed in the past? What is the reality of the situation?

14. Refer to your research on status and behavior in Regency England. What social or societal constraints are placed on Edward? On Elinor? Marianne? Lucy Steele?

15. Refer to your research on the expectations of a gentleman in Regency England. What career option has Edward chosen? What other options were available to him? In what ways might the settled, small-community nature of his chosen profession be a better fit for Edward than his other option?

16. If Edward was unable to marry Lucy Steele without losing his entire inheritance, why can Robert do so and stay rich? Which circumstances changed, and why?

17. Which characters in the play are primarily motivated by the want or need of money? Which characters look for fulfillment in other ways?

18. If you are also seeing Destiny of Desire and/or Romeo and Juliet, compare the daughters in the play. How is each daughter valued and by whom? Which daughters find power by defying the societal expectations of their role as women?

19. If you are also seeing Love’s Labor’s Lost, Destiny of Desire and/or Romeo and Juliet, compare the relationship between love and marriage in these plays. In each play, how much power or input do the women have in if and whom they will marry? Who holds the final power of choice in each play, and why?
THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND ACCORDING TO JANE AUSTEN

When Jane Austen was only 15, she wrote a satirical piece for her older sister and lifelong companion, Cassandra. It was titled The History of England, from the reign of Henry IV to the death of Charles I, by a partial, prejudiced and ignorant historian. There will be very few Dates in this History.

Her first two chapters recount the same history told with far more pomp and ceremony at OSF this season and last. They read as follows.

“Henry IV ascended to the throne of England much to his own satisfaction in the year 1399, after having prevailed on his cousin and predecessor Richard II to resign it to him, and to retire for the rest of his life to Pomfret Castle, where he happened to be murdered. It is to be supposed that Henry was married, since he had certainly four sons, but it is not in my power to inform the reader who was his wife. Be that as it may, he did not live forever, but falling ill, his son the Prince of Wales came and took away the crown; whereupon the King made a long speech, for which I must refer the reader to Shakespeare’s plays, and the Prince made a still longer. Things having been thus settled with them, the King died, and was succeeded by his son Henry, who had previously beat Sir William Gascoigne (The Lord Chief Justice).

The Prince after he succeeded to the throne grew quite reformed and amiable, forsaking all his dissipated companions and never thrashing Sir William again. During his reign Lord Cobham was burnt alive, but I forget what for. His majesty then turned his thoughts to France, where he went and fought the famous Battle of Agincourt. He afterwards married the King’s daughter Catherine, a very agreeable woman by Shakespeare’s account. In spite of all this however, he died.”