

Activity Plan

<i>Title</i>	Acting Up, A Melodrama Performing like Jo March and her sisters in Little Women.
<i>Subject</i>	Theatre; Social Studies; ELA
<i>Author</i>	ArtsEdge: Mary Beth Bauernschub
<i>Grade level</i>	9-12
<i>Time duration</i>	60 mins
<i>Overview</i>	In Louisa May Alcott's novel Little Women, Jo March and her sisters love to put on plays. Jo writes the scripts and all of the girls create costumes and props. They perform for other girls in their community. The most popular style of theatre in the 1860's was melodrama. Louisa May Alcott wrote a rough plot of a melodrama in her book, Little Women. In this lesson, the students practice some melodramatic movement. After reading the melodrama in Little Women, students are divided into five groups and assigned an act to interpret. They expand the lines, create melodies, and rehearse their act for presentation to the class.
<i>Objective</i>	Developing Arts Literacies: Understanding Genres, Analyzing and Evaluating - Critique Making Art: Composing and Planning, Producing, Executing and Performing Students will: Identify and practice ways to show emotions on stage Define the vocabulary words Read the melodrama described in Little Women Retell the story in a story circle Identify elements needed to write a play In groups, write expanded dialog and action for an act in the melodrama In groups, rehearse the act using the melodramatic acting style Perform the act as a play
<i>Materials</i>	Materials Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Printable

Activities and procedures

- [Plot Summary](#)
- [Playwriting Outline](#)

Required Technology

- Television
- DVD Player
- Projector
- Video Camera

ENGAGE

1. Tell students that they will be writing and acting in a melodrama. Explain that in the novel *Little Women*, the March sisters love this type of theatre. The novel contains a description of a melodrama written by the character Jo. Tell the students that they will be creating a script for this play.

2. Ask the students whether any of them have seen one of the following:

- A “Dudley Do-Right” cartoon from the *Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*.
- A silent film where the actors use their bodies and faces to convey information to their audience.
- A classic "cliffhanger" serial.

3. Explain that all of these above are examples of melodrama. Tell the students that melodrama is a theatrical style popular throughout America in the 1800’s. The plays explain tales of good vs. evil. The hero and heroine are very good and pure of intent. The villains are bad, merciless, and evil. The style of acting typically used in melodrama is very exaggerated and showy. The melodramatic style of acting and storytelling may look strange—or even silly—today, but it was very entertaining to people 150 years ago.

BUILD KNOWLEDGE

1. Explain that the actors of in the 1800’s were trained in the classical style, which meant that they were given a set of movements to express certain emotions. The audiences could easily understand these movements; even if they did not understand the verbal language, they could interpret the body language. Model a few of the movements described below and have the students copy them. Have them guess what emotion is being expressed.

Examples of Emotions:

- *Grief*: Head down, shoulders rounded, hands cupping the face. Raising the shoulders up and down, with a sobbing noise, is optional.

- *Fear*: Face turned to the right side, with the right hand to the mouth, fingers curled under touching the top of the palm.
- *Horror*: Eyes wide, mouth open, both hands to the cheeks with the fingers extended.
- *Fortitude*: Body straight, chest up, hand to forehead, with the palm facing the audience and fingers curled slightly.
- *Love Expressed (Male)*: Chest held high, right hand crosses the chest and rests on the upper left over the heart, then opens out to the right and the loved one.
- *Love Expressed (Female)*: Chest held high, head cocked a bit to the side, opposite leg goes out with foot pointed, hands under the chin, fingers entwined and bent at the first and second knuckles (almost praying), hands go toward the loved one, smile on face.
- *Evil Planning*: One eyebrow up, the other down, a grimace on the face and hands rubbing together, if it is a really good plan, the fingers twiddle.
- *Evil Sneaking*: Shoulders hunched over, arm raised to cover the nose on down, eyes free to shift around the room, legs bent on the cross of the stage.
- *Pride*: Chest up, hands with knuckles to both hips, legs slightly apart, a balanced look.
- *Anger*: Both hands shoulder high, eyebrows pushed toward each other, face tense with a grimace, hands in tight fists.
- *Overwhelmed*: Chin up bringing the face to look up, one arm dropped limp to the side, the other hand open with palm towards the audience on the top of the forehead.

2. After practicing the movements above, see if the students have any other ideas for emotions and the appropriate body language to convey it. Have the students stretch out after all of the movement and emotional work and relax for a few minutes.

3. Explain to students that in melodrama, the actors of the time were given certain “lines of business.” This meant that they were cast as a certain character type, like hero, heroine, villain, old man, comedian, etc. They learned how to speak, walk, dress, use certain facial expressions, and behave as this character type. This was helpful for the actors, who often had little rehearsal for new plays or were playing several parts a week (*or even within the same play*).

4. Tell the students that the characters written by Jo for the play presented at Christmas in Little Women, very much have character types or “lines of business.” Jo plays Hugo, the villain, and Roderigo, the hero. Meg plays Zara, the heroine, and Hagar, an old witch.

Because they know their “lines of business”, the girls can present the five acts of the melodrama and their audience clearly understands the story.

5. Have the students read the selection “A Merry Christmas” in Chapter 2 of *Little Women*. They should start with the paragraph that begins, “The morning charities and ceremonies took so much time that the rest of the day...” and end with ...”Mrs. March’s compliments, and would the ladies walk down to supper.” Tell them that there is going to be a round robin retelling of *Operatic Tragedy*.

6. After the students have read the excerpt once or twice, have them sit in a circle and retell the story of Roderigo and Zara in *Operatic Tragedy*. (*Note: you may wish to distribute the 'Plot Summary Handout' located within the Resource Carousel for the students' reference.*) The first student should begin the story and talk for a few sentences. Then, he or she should look at the person to the left, cueing them to continue the story. If errors happen in the retelling, the class should stop and see if anyone can fix the mistake. Then, an individual student should pick up the story with the correct information. The round robin should continue until the tale has ended.

7. Ask the students to identify things that the March girls do to make the play interesting for the audience. (*They had homemade props, sets, costumes, and added music.*) The acts broke up the action and to give the girls time to change costumes and sets. Even though minor mishaps occur, the play goes off well.

8. Ask students to think about the elements that are needed to write a play. (*Examples include an idea for a plot, a title, a setting, characters, and dialogue.*) Explain that a play also has to contain a conflict that may or may not be resolved. Each scene contains events and dialogue to move the story along. Explain that dialogue is written differently than narrative text. Write an example on the board, such as:

- *Hugo*: "What ho, minion! I need thee!"
- *Hagar*: (singing) "Hither, hither, from my home, Airy sprite, I bid thee come!"

APPLY

1. Break the class into five groups and assign each group an act of *Operatic Tragedy* to write out in play form. The scenes do not need to be particularly long, and the students may use the lines that appear in *Little Women* if they wish. Some acts require music or sound effects; students should include these elements. Explain that they need not include the accident with the set falling. Instead, they should try to write the play as they think Jo intended it to be.

2. Assign roles within the group as follows:

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- the writer, who records the information;
 - the director, who oversees the production and keeps the group on task;
 - the composer, who writes the background music or tune for any songs in the act;
 - the spokesperson, who reports to the class about the group's activities; and the designer, who oversees costumes, props, and set pieces.

Any other group members are actors; if necessary, the students who are filling the roles described above can also be actors.

3. Give each group a [Playwriting Outline](#) worksheet located within the Resource Carousel. The groups should reread their assigned act and complete the worksheet. They should outline their ideas for their assigned act, identify its characters, and describe its setting. Then, give groups time to compose the dialogue and actions. The students may wish to improvise first, and then write out the dialogue and actions on paper.

REFLECT

1. When a first draft is complete, the groups should read the act aloud to the teacher, and you should point out areas that they may want to alter or tweak.

2. Students should rehearse the act using some of the classical acting style gestures learned earlier. They should gather the props, set, and costume pieces for the performance from home and the classroom. The lines do not need to be memorized. The actors may use scripts, but they should be familiar enough with the words that they are not looking solely at the words. The music can be something simple. If students cannot think of a tune, suggest that they try setting lyrics to a familiar melody, such as *Jingle Bells* or *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.*”

3. The groups should perform *Operatic Tragedy* in sequence. If possible, videotape the production so that all groups can appreciate the whole play.

ASSESSMENT

Collect the copies of the scripts and worksheets for a paper record of the group work. Assess students on their completion of the following tasks:

- The act closely followed Alcott's explanations of the events in *Operatic Tragedy*.
 - The styles that were used in the presentation of the act.
 - Where appropriate, music was added to the act.
 - The groups worked cooperatively.
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- Props, costumes, and set pieces were used.

KEY VOCABULARY

- Melodrama
- Character
- Drama
- Play
- Plot
- Setting
- Character Type

Conclusions

Teachers should have read *Little Women* and should familiarize themselves with the genre of melodrama using the following sources:

Print:

- Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. New York, 1868.
- Brown, John Russell (editor). *The Oxford Illustrated History of Theatre*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Friedman, Lise. *Break a Leg! The Kids' Guide to Acting and Stagecraft*. New York: Workman Publishing, 2002.
- Kemper, Dave; Nathan, Ruth; and Sebranek, Patrick. *Write On Track*. Wilmington, Massachusetts: Great Source Education Group/Houghton Mifflin Company; 1996.
- McCaslin, Nellie. *Creative Dramatics in the Classroom*. New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1974.
- Peterson, Lenka & O'Connor, Dan. *Kids Take the Stage*. New York: Back Stage Books, 1997.

Media:

- Griffith, D.W. (dir.). *Way Down East*. Image Entertainment, 1920.
- Griffith, D.W. (dir.). *Broken Blossoms*. Kino Video, 1919.
- Sjöström, Victor (dir.) *The Wind*. Warner Studios, 1928.

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- *Nicholas Nickleby* – Any adaptation of the book by Charles Dickens, either the PBS mini-series, Royal Shakespeare Company’s, or the film version from Miramax. Look at the scenes with Nicholas and Smike joining the Crummles’ theatrical troupe. Here see the character types and their “lines of business” in a melodrama.

Web:

- Creative Drama & Theater Education [Resource Site](#)
- For tips on getting students started with playwriting, see the ARTSEEDGE How-to feature "Go Deeper with Drama: Playwriting with your Students."

Prior Student Knowledge

Students should be familiar with the story of *Little Women*. It is not necessary for students to have seen examples of melodrama prior to the lesson. You should, however, have at least one example of the genre available to show them (suggestions: A “Dudley Do-Right” cartoon from the *Bullwinkle and Rocky Show*, a silent film where the actors use their bodies and faces to convey information to their audience, or a classic "cliffhanger" serial).

Adaptations

Accessibility Note: Students with physical disabilities may need modified movements.

Links and Websites

Extending the Learning

The whole class works together to create Act 1 as a model for how to work cooperatively and for play writing practice. Break the class into four groups to complete the work