



**ARTS CLUB**

ALIVE ON THREE STAGES

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**TEACHER RESOURCE GUIDE**

*REDBONE COONHOUND*

**BY**

**AMY LEE LAVOIE & OMARI NEWTON**

2022.23 Season

Newmont Stage @ BMO Theatre Centre

October 6–30, 2022

Community partner:



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# Welcome

**This guide was created for teachers and students. It contains an overview of the play's story as well as informative resources and activities for teachers and students.**

**The guide aims to provide background knowledge and critical perspectives on the play that will yield fruitful discussion and foster an understanding and appreciation of theatre arts.**

**If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions for the guide, please contact Education & Community Engagement Manager Hila Graf at [hgraf@artsclub.com](mailto:hgraf@artsclub.com).**

**This study guide was written and designed by Ceanna Wood & Natalie Davidson**

# About the Arts Club Theatre Company

The Arts Club of Vancouver was founded in 1958 as a private club for artists, musicians, and actors. It became the Arts Club Theatre in 1964 when the company opened its first stage in a converted gospel hall at Seymour and Davie Streets.

Now in its 59th season of producing professional live theatre in Vancouver, the Arts Club Theatre Company is a non-profit charitable organization that operates three theatres: the Granville Island Stage, the Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage, and the Newmont Stage at the BMO Theatre Centre. It's popular productions range from musicals and contemporary comedies to new works and classics.

Learn more about the Arts Club Theatre Company at [artsclub.com](http://artsclub.com)



# ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHTS: OMARI NEWTON & AMY LEE LAVOIE

## OMARI NEWTON

Omari Newton (he/him) is an award-winning professional actor, writer, director, and a senior instructor at The Vancouver Film School. As a writer, his original Hip Hop theatre piece *Sal Capone* has received critical acclaim and multiple productions, including a recent presentation at Canada's National Arts Centre. He has been commissioned by Black Theatre Workshop (BTW) in Montreal to write a companion piece to *Sal Capone* entitled *Black & Blue Matters*. He often co-writes with his wife, playwright Amy Lee Lavoie. Newton's work in Speakeasy Theatre's production of Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment* earned him a 2017-2018 Jessie Richardson Award for Outstanding Performance by an Actor, as well as a nomination for Best Direction.



## AMY LEE LAVOIE

Amy Lee Lavoie is an award-winning playwright and a graduate of the National Theatre School of Canada's Playwriting Program. Her first play, *Rabbit Rabbit*, received its premiere production with Infinitheatre, earning Amy Lee two MECCA's for Best Text and the Revelation Award. Other plays include *Me Happy* (co-written with Matthew Mackenzie/Summerworks Festival), *Stopheart* (Factory Theatre), *Genetic Drift* (Pi Theatre/Boca del Lupo), *My Tom* (Railtown Lab Series), *Scout's Honour* (Radio Play/Imago Theatre) and *C'mon, Angie!* (Touchstone Theatre/Leroy Street Theatre).





# Learning Objectives

After viewing Redbone Coonhound and engaging with some of the discussion questions and resources provided in this guide, students should be able to:

- Identify the use of satire and parody as literary devices in the play
- Begin to engage in conversations about race, considering their own identities and how they might relate to the play or be challenged by it
- Begin to understand the complexity and intersections of race and gender in interpersonal relationships

## BC Curriculum Connections



### Drama I2

- Evaluate the social, cultural, historical, environmental, and personal contexts of dramatic works
- Demonstrate personal and social responsibility associated with creating, performing, and responding to dramatic works
- Examine the impacts of dramatic works on culture and society

### Literary Studies I2

- Understand and appreciate how different forms, formats, structures, and features of texts reflect a variety of purposes, audiences, and messages (for example, literary devices, like satire)
- Think critically, creatively, and reflectively to analyze ideas within, between, and beyond texts
- Recognize and analyze personal, social, cultural contexts, values, and perspectives in texts, including culture, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status

### 20th Century World History I2

- Compare and contrast continuities and changes for different groups at particular times and places (continuity and change)
- Assess how underlying conditions and the actions of individuals or groups affect events, decisions, and developments, and analyze multiple consequences (cause and consequence)
- Explain different perspectives on past or present people, places, issues, and events by considering prevailing norms, values, worldviews, and beliefs (perspective)
- Make reasoned ethical judgments about controversial actions in the past or present, and assess whether we have a responsibility to respond

# Synopsis

Out for a walk in their West End, Vancouver neighbourhood, Mike and Marissa—an interracial married couple—meet a dog with an unfortunate breed name: Redbone Coonhound. For context, the term "redbone" originated in Louisiana as a Cajun word for a lighter-skinned mixed-race person, but it is a disparaging description that feeds into colourism. The word "coon" is extremely offensive and comes from minstrel show characters like "Zip Coon", who were performed by white people in black face and perpetuated contemptuous and derogatory stereotypes of Black people. Within the Black community today, the word is used to insult a Black person who allegedly acts in such a way to gain favour from white people. As a Black man, Mike is understandably incensed by this name that contains these two racial slurs. Suddenly, the Coonhound chases Mike into Stanley Park, and he transforms into his great-great-grandfather, who's trying to escape the American South and get to Canada via the Underground Railroad in 1840. This is the first of a series of "play provocations" within the play itself that travel through time and space. These provocations are satirical meditations on the ideas presented by the main storyline, and are driven by either Marissa or Mike and their attempt to understand their partner's point of view. They are almost like fever dreams, existing in a space between white fragility and Black fatigue, and satirize contemporary perspectives on modern culture through pop culture references and tropes that will be particularly familiar to Black audiences. In between these micro-plays, a cascading debate between Mike and Marissa about race and the nature of their relationship intensifies, especially when they have dinner with Marissa's white step-brother Jordan and their Black friends, Gerald and Aisha. Through its hard-hitting comedic elements, Redbone Coonhound explores the intricacies of race, systemic power, and privilege in remarkable and surprising ways.



# Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was not underground, nor was it a railroad. It was a network of clandestine routes and safe houses (which were called stations) established in the United States during the early to mid-19th century. The Underground Railroad assisted enslaved African Americans in their escape to freedom, often to Northern states where slavery has been abolished. Those who guided people along the Railroad were known as "conductors". It was operated by formerly enslaved Black people, free Black people, and by white abolitionists, many of whom were Quakers. Some Native Americans in the Great Lakes region are also thought to have assisted based on oral history. The passage of the amended Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 required that all escaped enslaved people, upon capture, had to be returned to the slaver and even in free states, officials and citizens had to cooperate, otherwise they would face criminal charges. This spurred some moderate abolitionists in the North to take action to defy the law, lest they be morally aligned with slavery. During this time, The Underground Railroad reached its peak of operation, and the main destination for escape was British North America (later to become Canada), where slavery had been abolished since August 1st, 1834. Estimates vary widely, but at least 30,000-50,000 people escaped to Canada via the Underground Railroad. Some estimates put that number up to 100,000, but considering that in 1860, there were approximately 3.9 million enslaved people in the United States, the Underground Railroad was only a route to freedom for a small percentage of people. Nevertheless, it was a marvellously improvised, metaphorical construct run by courageous heroes, many of whom were Black themselves, who risked their lives to save the lives of others.

## HARRIET TUBMAN



Harriet Tubman was an escaped enslaved woman who became a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, leading enslaved people to freedom before the Civil War, all while carrying a bounty on her head. But she was also a nurse, a Union spy, and a women's suffrage supporter. On September 17, 1849, Harriet escaped the Maryland plantation where she was enslaved. With the help of the Underground Railroad, Harriet persevered and travelled 90 miles north to Pennsylvania and freedom. It is believed that Harriet personally led at least 70 enslaved people to freedom, including her elderly parents, and is estimated to

have instructed over 60 others on how to escape on their own, none of whom were caught. She is famous for saying, "I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger." She usually acted in winter months when her group would be less likely to be seen. Though she received help from white abolitionists, these missions were still incredibly treacherous and she put herself at tremendous personal risk. She was nicknamed "Moses" by abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison because like Moses in the Bible who led the Hebrews to freedom from Egypt, Harriet wanted nothing more than to set her people free, and she did. She was also a deeply religious woman with unshakeable faith, which was intensified by a traumatic head injury she suffered from a violent overseer. After this incident, for which she received no medical attention, she began to experience vivid dreams and powerful visions. She believed these were revelations and premonitions from God that helped keep her and those she guided safe during her trips.



# Hogan's Alley & Black Vancouver

Early in the play the narrator emphasizes the lack of Black people and a distinct Black community in Vancouver. This was not always the case, as Vancouver once was home to “Hogan’s Alley”. Hogan’s Alley was the unofficial name for a T-shaped intersection at the southwestern edge of Strathcona. The name was in use by 1914 and over the years, and the area became a distinctly Black neighbourhood that included cottages, makeshift night clubs, and southern style restaurants as well as “chicken house” restaurants, such as Vie’s Chicken and Steak House that also operated as a speakeasy. This establishment was well-known and well-loved within the community, and Jimi Hendrick’s grandmother, Nora Hendricks, used to work there as a cook. Vie’s Chicken and Steak was visited by famous jazz musicians of the time, like Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald, Sammy Davis Jr., Cab Calloway, Count Basie, Mitzi Gaynor, and Nat King Cole. Hogan’s Alley was also home to the Crump Twins, who were part of one of the original Black families that had migrated from Oklahoma to Vancouver, and twins Robert and Ronnie were two young boys who loved to dance, sing and act in many of the local places on Hogan’s Alley. There were also Porter clubs, like The Pullman Porter’s Club, which backed onto Hogan’s Alley, and was patronized predominantly by Black men who worked as sleeping car porters for the railroad. Its presence connected Hogan’s Alley with Black communities throughout North America by word of mouth and organizations like the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, an organization created to advocate for Black rights.

Over the years, the Black population endured efforts by the city to rezone Strathcona making it difficult to obtain mortgages or make home improvements, and by news articles slandering Hogan’s Alley as a centre of squalor, immorality, and crime. Beginning in 1967, the City of Vancouver began levelling the western half of Hogan’s Alley to construct an interurban freeway through Hogan’s Alley and Chinatown. The freeway was ultimately stopped, but construction of the first phase – the Georgia Viaduct – was completed in 1971. In the process, the western end of Hogan’s Alley was expropriated and several blocks of houses were demolished. Since the demise of Hogan’s Alley, no identifiably Black neighbourhood has emerged in Vancouver.

**To learn more Black history in Vancouver and view some great storytelling videos, visit: <http://blackstrathcona.com/>**

# DEFINITIONS

**Cultural appropriation:** when members of a majority group adopt cultural elements of a minority group in an exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical way

**Misogyny:** dislike of, contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against women.

**Patriarchy:** a system of society or government in which men hold the power and women are largely excluded from it

**Systemic racism:** a form of racism that is embedded in the laws and regulations of a society or an organization.

**White supremacy:** a political, economic and cultural system in which Whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of White superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of White dominance and non-White subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.

**White fragility:** discomfort and defensiveness on the part of a white person when confronted by information about racial inequality and injustice.

**White privilege:** inherent advantages possessed by a white person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice.

**Woke:** Originating in African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), to be "woke" is to be alert to racial prejudice and discrimination.

## BLACK LIVES MATTER

BlackLivesMatter is mentioned in the play, and is a global organization founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer, inspiring a new generation of protests against police and vigilante violence toward Black people. Their mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by combating and counter acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centring Black joy. BLM affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise by the state and vigilantes.

<https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>

# POP CULTURE REFERENCES & SATIRE

*Redbone Coonhound* effectively uses both satire and parody to critique and comment on race relations in a humorous way. Satire is defined as a literary device that exposes and criticizes the foolishness of an individual or a society by using humour, irony, exaggeration or ridicule. A parody is a composition that imitates the style of another composition, normally for comic effect. There are several pop culture references in the "mini-plays" of *Redbone Coonhound* that are parodied for satirical effect, described below.

## THE TRAIN HOME

Depictions of the slave narrative in Hollywood films like *Roots*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Harriet*, *The Underground Railroad*, and more are parodied in the first "mini-play" of *Redbone Coonhound*, where the Quakers who come to assist "Glib" on his journey to freedom are portrayed as buffoons, making fun of the white saviour trope that is often present in stories about The Underground Railroad. It also includes a hilarious rap song sung by the character of Harriet Tubman, possibly in reference Hollywood stylization of her life in the blockbuster movie *Harriet*, which also includes a song sung from Tubman's perspective.

## NOW YOU TRY: MISS SUE & MR. JIMMY

The famous staircase dance number that Shirley Temple performed with Bill "Bojangles" from the 1935 movie *The Little Colonel* is referenced next. They were the first interracial duo to tap dance together on screen and shared a genuine friendship, but his role in the movie reinforced stereotypes that Black people are happy to be of service to whites, and are incapable of having feelings and thoughts beyond that. This scene is satirized in *Redbone Coonhound* using dark and gruesome humour to expose the Shirley Temple character to the very real oppression of being a Black performer, but also calls attention to how she was exploited and sexualized as a child actor as well. The original dance scene can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arkkGjDpa8E>

## JAMAL MAKAMBE YATES IS COMING TO DINNER

*Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is a movie in which Sydney Poitier famously portrayed John Prentice, the Black partner of a wealthy white woman. They attend a dinner with her liberal parents who must confront their latent racism as they come to terms with their daughter's engagement. The film was one of the first to depict an interracial marriage in a positive light but is not without criticism, as John's character is seemingly perfect and highly idealized, and some felt he did not truly reflect the typical Black experience of the time. *Redbone Coonhound* reverses this plot, with the white family being horrified to learn that their daughter is marrying a white man, instead of a Black man. The scene pokes fun at the wannabe "wokeness" of white people, and how they still exoticize Black culture and desire to consume it as their own, illustrated by the mother wearing a Dashiki, the celebration over Jamal's DNA test, and their cringeworthy African drum dance at the end.

## THE BLACK AGENDA

*Star Trek* and *Black Panther* are both clear inspirations for the mini-play that takes place on a spaceship. This scene draws heavily on the genre of "Afrofuturism", which is speculative fiction, usually science fiction, that focuses on Black themes and concerns and looks at the future and alternate realities through a Black cultural lens. *Star Trek* was one of the first American series to promote racial diversity and multiculturalism in its cast, with the character of Lieutenant Uhura being one of the first Black women on TV who was not portrayed as a servant. In *Redbone Coonhound*, this scene takes a humorous approach to the concept of reparations, and also references the Central Park birdwatching incident, where a white woman placed a 911 call falsely accusing an African American man of threatening her life. In the script, the character who admits to a similar incident is named Karen, which is a name that has become synonymous with the kind of privileged white woman who perpetuates racially charged hostility. In real life, the birdwatching incident occurred the same day George Floyd was killed by police officers in Minneapolis, meaning people began linking the racism of "Karens" to the wider issue of systemic racism and police brutality.



# Discussion Questions

## Pre-show Questions

- What's your earliest memory of becoming aware of racism?
- How comfortable are you talking about race? Is it something you consider day-to-day? Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt "different" in a group setting because of your race/ethnicity? How did this affect you? If not, have you ever considered what it might feel like, or why you've never felt "different"?
- What do you think of when you hear the term white supremacy?
- Do you ever feel like you might have been acting unfairly toward somebody because of their race?
- How would it make you feel if a person of colour called something you did or said racist? How would you respond?

## Post-show Questions

- How do the pop culture references in this play work to engage with topics around race and racism? Did you find them funny? Why or why not?
- Consider both Mike and Marissa's perspectives throughout the play. Is there anything you relate to, or find easier to understand in either of their experiences?
- How does Mike change throughout the play?
- Is there anything that you didn't understand about the play?
- What do you think the significance of the ending of this play is?

# Further Resources

**Black Fatigue by Mary Frances Winters**

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/647356/black-fatigue-by-mary-frances-winters/>

**The Skin We're In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power by Desmond Cole**

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/536075/the-skin-were-in-by-desmond-cole/9780385686341>

**Policing Black Lives by Robyn Maynard**

<https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/book/policing-black-lives>

**We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity by bell hooks**

<https://bellhooksbooks.com/product/we-real-cool-black-men-and-masculinity/>

**Black Lives Matter Toolkit Resource Page**

<https://blacklivesmatter.com/resources/>

**Resistance and Resurgence: Confronting Anti-Black Racism in Canada**

<https://feministsdeliver.com/register-for-resistance-and-resurgence-confronting-anti-black-racism-in-canada/>

**Collection of free films by award-winning Black filmmakers, creators, and allies of the Black community**

[https://www.nfb.ca/channels/black-communities-canada/?ed\\_en=feature\\_4&feature\\_type=playlist&banner\\_id=79609%20](https://www.nfb.ca/channels/black-communities-canada/?ed_en=feature_4&feature_type=playlist&banner_id=79609%20)

**1619 Podcast: An audio series on how slavery has transformed America**

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html>

**Hogan's Alley Society**

<https://www.hogansalleysociety.org/>

**Resources for Educators on Anti-Black Racism (Longer List)**

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1R5LiIMikICJStuu85fczoqNX07Ku0GPsjRRxwIfIA-Y/edit>

**21 Black Futures: 40 Parsecs and Some Fuel**

<https://www.facebook.com/CBCArts/videos/245574967725867/>



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- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yq\\_RIGbJnOE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yq_RIGbJnOE)
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