



WHY THEY RAN:

Exercises designed to bring the themes and historical context of the play NIGHT RUNNER to life

LESSON OVERVIEW

Students (Ages 8 and up) are led through a series of theatre experiences designed to help them understand the motivations of the characters in NIGHT RUNNER as well as why the Underground Railroad was created. This lesson does not require any previous experience with NIGHT RUNNER. The exercises are sequentially taught to gradually introduce the Underground Railroad while encouraging risk taking, creative problem solving, participation, and collaboration. Exercises include:

- Introduction/Raise Your Hand If...
- Hot Seat with Harriet Tubman
- Tableaux of Life on the Plantation
- Reflection

OBJECTIVES

- Advance knowledge of the conditions of slavery and explore why the Underground Railroad was created in order to understand the context of NIGHT RUNNER
- Make personal connections with historical figures of the Underground Railroad as well as with the runaway enslaved people
- Create a positive environment in order to share and learn from peers

TIME NEEDED

1 hour—75 minutes

OUTCOMES TIED TO CURRICULUM

- History/Social Studies— Slavery, The Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman
- Fine Arts— Role Playing, Tableaux
- Working as a group, cooperating, listening, problem solving

SPACE

An open space so students can move.

MATERIALS

- A list of statements for Raise Your Hand If...
- A sheet of paper and a writing utensil for each student
- Optional: clipboards for each student

THE EXERCISE

1. Introduce the Lesson and Focus Check

- Introduce the focus check. You say, "All aboard the..." And the students respond with, "Underground Railroad."
- Practice using the focus check with different levels of volume and speed

"Today, we are going to use our voices, bodies, and imaginations to explore the themes and historical events in NIGHT RUNNER. Sometimes we may get loud and I will need your attention, so I will say, 'All aboard the...' When you hear that phrase, you should freeze, put your eyes on me, and respond with, 'Underground Railroad.' Let's practice."

2. Raise Your Hand If...

This exercise activates prior knowledge about concepts, events, and topics in life as well as in NIGHT RUNNER. The exercise also builds community as students share and observe common experiences.

- Students can stay at their desks or if there is a small number of them circle up. Tell students that they will hear a series of prompts starting with "Raise your hand if this statement is true about you..." If the statement applies, they should raise their hands.
- Begin with non-content related prompts to establish the pattern. Then move to content related statements that will gradually get more detailed as the exercise progresses.
- Ask follow up questions to the prompts.
- Sample Raise your hand ifs...

you have been treated unfairly

you have mistreated someone else

you saw someone else get bullied

you took a risk to help someone else

you have a hero in your life

you are part of a community

Transition to the next exercise by informing the students of the following:

- The community of the **Underground Railroad** helped an estimated 100,000 American enslaved people out of around four million reach freedom in the North. This secret or “underground” movement was a loosely organized network of free African Americans and abolitionists, or people who wanted to put an end to **slavery**. Those who guided enslaved people on their journey were called **conductors**.
- **Harriet Tubman** is probably the most well-known of all the Underground Railroad's conductors. After she escaped from slavery, Harriet took the risk to return to the South 19 times and guided over 300 slaves to freedom.
- Few facts are known about the operations of the Underground Railroad. Because their activities were risky and often illegal, very few people kept written records. So, **historians** have to piece together the general information that they can find.

Ask the students how they would define a “**historian**.” Some possible answers include:

- an expert who studies and writes about history
- a scholar of past events
- an investigator of the past

3. Hot Seat with Harriet Tubman

This exercise gives the students the opportunity to role-play as historians as well as challenge them to formulate effective questions. Through active listening, the students will learn more about the conditions of slavery and the history of the Underground Railroad. (For your reference, attached to the lesson plan is a biography of Harriet Tubman and some more information about slavery and the Underground Railroad.)

- Students can go back to their desks, or you can pass out clipboards with a piece of paper on each.
- Explain that you need their help finding more information about the Underground Railroad. As historians, it is their job to come up with 3 questions they would ask Harriet Tubman in order to learn **why the Underground Railroad was formed**. Let the students know that if they were to interview Harriet Tubman in person, they could always adjust their questions based on what she answers.
- Tell the students that they have **8 minutes** to write down their questions.
- When time is almost up, leave the room and come back in character as Harriet Tubman.
- In character, tell the students that you have come to answer their questions.

“I was told a group of historians would like to ask me some questions. My name’s Harriet Tubman. What you got for me?”

- If a student asks a question that you don't know the answer to, reply:

"That's confidential. Next."

- Try to let each student ask at least one question before you leave.

"I hope that cleared some things up for you. Now, I have a train to catch."

- When you come back into the room, ask the students what they learned.

"Why was the Underground Railroad formed?"

4. Tableaux of Life on the Plantation

This exercise will help the students to express what they have learned in the previous exercise through images and gain a greater awareness of how their bodies can create shapes. It requires collaboration and imagination.

- Split the students quickly into groups of three or four.
- Explain that a **tableau** is a group of people arranged in a frozen picture. Ask the students what would make a successful tableau. Possible answers include: different levels, expressive facial features, creative use of space, etc.
- Tell the groups that they have **4 minutes** to create a tableau that depicts how life was like on a plantation.
- At the end of the 4 minutes, have each group present. Ask the observing groups what they see in the image.
- Next, give the groups **5 minutes** to represent what they think freedom looks like.
- At the end of the 5 minutes, have each group present. Ask the observing groups to guess the image of the presenting group. Discuss what elements make it easier or harder to identify.
- Reflect on the tableaux as a group. Compare and contrast the first set of tableaux with the second set. Did groups have similar images?

5. Reflection on the Creative Process

- Ask the students to share what it was like to collaborate with their peers. What worked well and why? How did they decide which image to create?
- Reflect on the different exercises. How did the tableaux exercise compare to the hot seat exercise? What did they learn in each?
- Why did some of the enslaved people of the South decide to run away? What were the challenges they faced?

EXTENSIONS (IF ANY)

- Connect to how messages were sent through songs on the Underground Railroad. In groups, have students create their own songs with secret messages about how to get North to freedom. Provide "Follow the Drinking Gourd" as an example. Introduce concepts such as **verse**, **chorus**, and **metaphor**.