DEATH AND THE KING’S HORSEMAN

DEATH AND THE KING’S HORSEMAN
By Wole Soyinka
Directed by Tawiah M’Carthy

GRADE RECOMMENDATION 9+

CONTENT ADVISORY
This play deals with the harms of colonialism and oppression. It contains discriminatory language. A major topic within the play is ritual suicide.

SYNOPSIS
In the marketplace of a Yoruba community in colonial-era Nigeria, Elesin Oba engages in good-natured banter with his Olohun-iyo, or Praise-Singer – in traditional African society, a musician and poet whose role it is to laud important people. It is a momentous day for Elesin: his Alaafin, or king, has recently died, and tradition demands that Elesin, whose name reflects his rank as Chief Horseman, now practise ritual suicide in order that he may accompany his late ruler into the afterlife.

Though Elesin has always lustily enjoyed the pleasures of this world, he professes himself eager to embrace the more spiritual ones of the next. Nevertheless, he has come to the marketplace to revel for one last time in the adulation of the women there. And no sooner has he finished reciting the story of the “Not-I Bird,” a poetic ode disdaining the fear of death and extolling the virtue of honour, than his eye is caught by a beautiful young girl. Even though she is already betrothed to another, he insists on taking her as his bride that night, before fulfilling his sacrificial duty to his king.

Meanwhile, British District Officer Simon Pilkings and his wife, Jane, are about to attend a fancy-dress ball when word arrives of Elesin’s suicidal intentions. Pilkings orders Elesin’s arrest, but his officers encounter resistance from the women of the marketplace. Pilkings then intervenes personally, interrupting the ritual to have Elesin dragged away in handcuffs – and thereby provoking an unintendedly tragic turn of events.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS
● Global Competencies
  ♦ Collaboration, Communication, Critical Thinking, Creativity, Learning to Learn/Self-Awareness
● Grades 9-12
  ♦ The Arts
  ♦ Canadian and World Studies
  ♦ English
● Grades 11-12
  ♦ Social Sciences and Humanities

THEMES
● Ceremony (Sacred and Secular)
● Colonialism, Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Oppression
● The Complexity and Conflicts of Identity
● Cultural Interpretation and Preservation
● Culture as a Way of Life
● Duty and Responsibility
● Death and Ritual
● Family Dynamics and Inherited Roles
● Language and Culture, Language and Life/Death
● Names and Their Significance
● Transition and Cycles of Life/Death
● Willpower and Desire
● Yoruba Religion and Worldview
DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- The playwright, Wole Soyinka, has specifically stated that this play is not about a “clash of cultures.” Why do you think he said this so explicitly? What are some more accurate ways to describe the conflict in this play?
- What is the significance of the planned ritual being interrupted? In your opinion, does the ending of the play rectify this interruption?
- Several characters in this play do not fit into clear cultural divisions. How does this impact their identities and how the other characters in the play view them?
- What do you notice about the agency of the women in this play? How are they able to influence events?
- What does this play tell us about how human beings understand and engage with the reality of death and dying?

STUDY GUIDES

Study Guides for all 2022 productions are available free of charge online on our website:
>> Link to Study Guides

BOOKING INFORMATION: TICKETS, WORKSHOPS, CHATS AND TOURS

STUDENT MATINÉES

You may book any available date, but selected student matinée performances for this show are at 2 p.m. on the following dates:

- Wednesday, September 28th
- Thursday, September 29th
- Thursday, October 6th
- Friday, October 7th
- Friday, October 21st

WORKSHOPS, CHATS AND TOURS

Pre or Post-Show Workshops, Chats and Tours (virtual, onsite or at your school/centre) can be booked by calling the Box Office at 1.800.567.1600.

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