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plainsong

By Eric Schmiedl

Based upon the novel by

Kent Haruf

Directed by Kent Thompson

**Jan 25 - Feb 23,
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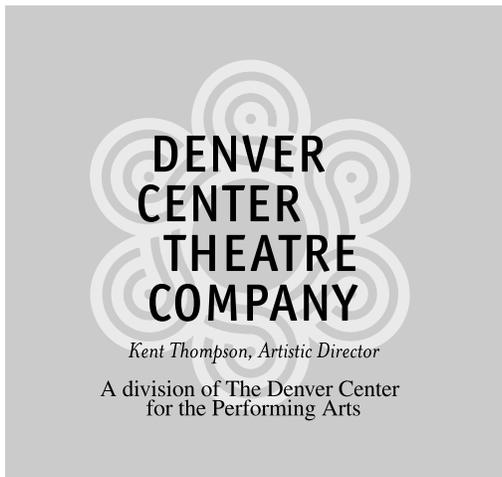


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Synopsis

“There is a world outside our own, out there and out of sight, between the coasts where people live slower, closer to nature, farther apart spatially, yet somehow more attached.”

—Bill Geist. *Way Off the Road*. New York: Broadway Books, 2007

Holt, Colorado is that kind of small town where everyone knows everyone’s business before it even happens. In this setting, Tom Guthrie, a high school teacher, struggles to keep his life together and raise his two sons, Ike and Bobbie, after their depressed mother first retreats to her bedroom, then a rented house, then to Denver to live with her sister. The pre-adolescent boys try to make sense of adult and teen behavior as well as their mother’s apparent abandonment. Meanwhile, Victoria, a pregnant teenager, is kicked out of the house by her mother and rejected by the father of her child. She is searching for a secure place in the world and finds it, temporarily, in the home of her teacher, Maggie Jones. And 17 miles outside town, two elderly bachelor brothers, Harold and Raymond McPheron, work the family farm as they have their entire lives, all but isolated from the community and from life.

From these separate snapshots emerges a picture of a community and landscape, a community of both beauty and ugliness. *Plainsong* is a play about abandonment, grief and stoicism that brings these characters together and a play that demonstrates how kindness, hope and dignity can restore and redeem damaged lives.

The Novelist

Kent Haruf was born on February 24, 1943, in Pueblo, Colorado, the son of a Methodist minister. He graduated with a BA from Nebraska Wesleyan University in 1965 and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa in 1973. Before becoming a writer, Haruf worked in a variety of places, including a chicken farm in Colorado, a construction site in Wyoming, a rehabilitation hospital in Denver, a hospital in Phoenix, a presidential library in Iowa, an alternative high school in Wisconsin and as an English teacher with the Peace Corps in Turkey. He currently lives with his wife, Cathy, in Sedalia, Colorado with their three daughters.

All of Haruf's novels take place in the fictional town of Holt in eastern Colorado. His first novel, *The Tie That Binds* (1984), received a Whiting Foundation Award and a special Hemingway/PEN citation. *Where You Once Belonged* followed in 1990. *Plainsong* was published in 1999 and became a bestseller. It won the Mountain and Plains Booksellers Award, the Maria Thomas Award in Fiction and was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction. And *Eventide* (2004), his second national bestseller, a finalist for the Book Sense Award was named Notable Book of the Year by a number of newspapers, including *The Denver Post*, *Rocky Mountain News*, *Kansas City Star* and *NY Daily News*. Kent's short fiction has been included in the "Best American Short Stories" anthology. He is currently collaborating with photographer Peter Brown on *West of Last Chance*, a book about the high plains, coming out in 2008 from WW Norton.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kent_Haruf

The Playwright

Eric Schmiedl is a native of Cleveland, Ohio and a graduate of Kent State University and the University of Hawaii. His plays have been produced by The Cleveland Play House, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, TheatreVirginia, New Stages Theatre, the Honolulu Theatre for Youth, the Oregon Children's Theatre, BackStage Theatre in Chicago, Karamu House, Theatre at Lime Kiln, and the Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati. He is currently working on a commission for the Oregon Children's Theatre, a rock 'n roll adaptation of *Treasure Island* created with recording artists Captain Bogg and Salty and a new script for Dobama Theatre in Cleveland.

Eric is a member of The Cleveland Play House's Playwrights' Unit and is on the faculty of the MFA in Writing program at Spalding University. He also is the recipient of the Lisa Toishigawa Inoye Playwriting Award.

The Commissioning of Plainsong and the Colorado New Play Summit

Eric Schmiedl's adaptation of Kent Haruf's bestselling novel was commissioned by the Denver Center Theatre Company through the Colorado New Play Summit, the company's annual new play development program.

Now in its third season, the annual Colorado New Play Summit brings together playwrights, producers and theatre professionals for an exciting weekend filled with performances and staged readings of new plays as well as other networking opportunities. This year's Summit features three world-premiere productions, all commissioned by the Theatre Company. *Plainsong* and *Our House* were both read in front of an audience at the 2007 Summit.

With funding from the Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust, Associate Artistic Director and Director of New Play Development Bruce K. Sevy have begun one of America's most ambitious new play commissioning programs, building a collection of new works to be featured at future Colorado New Play Summits and eventually on Denver and national stages in full productions.

Playwrights currently working on Denver Center commissioned works include Lee Blessing—author of the Pulitzer Prize, Tony Award and Olivier Award nominated *A Walk in the Woods* and winner of the 2006 Steinberg New Play Award for *A Memory of Water*; Constance Congdon—author of the widely produced *Tales of the Lost Formicans*, commissioned to write a new play about “water rights in the West;” Colorado native Steven Dietz—author of Pulitzer Prize and Steinberg New Play Award nominee *Last of the Boys*; José Cruz González—author of *September Shoes*, commissioned to write a play about the Latino experience in Colorado; Michele Lowe—author of the Outer Critics Circle Award nominee *String of Pearls*; Theresa Rebeck—co-author of Pulitzer Prize finalist *Omnium Gatherum*. Her play *Mauritius* opened on Broadway in October.

Theatre professionals, critics and playwrights from around the country have been invited to Denver to explore the next great American plays.

“We called the event a ‘summit’ because of the glorious Rocky Mountains, but also because we want to build this event into a ‘peak’ experience,” said Thompson. “We hope to create a new play festival that will become a must-see event for theatre professionals from across the United States.”

The 2008 Summit also will feature a panel discussion entitled *Switch Hitters* about playwrights who work in both the theatre and television. Many playwrights today find themselves choosing the option of writing for television as either a permanent or temporary career move. This panel will explore the financial, workplace, lifestyle, and aesthetic implications of switching between theatre and TV. The February 16th panel will include such noted playwrights as Theresa Rebeck, Elyzabeth Gregory Wilder and Keith Josef Adkins. The free event begins at 1:30pm in The Stage Theatre.

Sponsors of the Colorado New Play Summit are Daniel L. Ritchie, John Strom and Mary Pat Link, and The Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust.

The Significance of the Title

“Plainsong” can mean just that a single song about the plains. But in music, it is the name given to the body of traditional songs used in the Roman Catholic Church. Plainsong is monophonic, a single voice singing a simple, unadorned melody usually in free rather than measured rhythm. Gregorian chant is a variety of plainsong (or plainchant) named after Pope Gregory (6th century A.D.) who codified the liturgy.

Plainsong notation differs from the modern system of five lines, four spaces by having only four lines to the staff and a system of note-shapes called neumes. Its use is now mostly confined to monastic orders, though in the late 1980s, plainchant achieved a certain vogue as music for rest and meditation.

<http://www.answers.com/topic/plainsong>

Descriptions of Holt, Colorado

“This is the quintessential western, rocky mountain region, in which the stark landscape and sky are unbelievably important.”

—Design Conference Notes ¹

As Bobby and Ike deliver the newspapers on their early morning route, they see Holt in this way:

Bobby took the older, more established part of Holt, the south side where the wide flat streets were lined with elm trees and locust and hackberry and evergreen, where the comfortable two-story houses were set back in their own spaces of lawn and where behind them the car garages opened out onto the graveled alleys while Ike, for his part, took the three blocks of Main Street on both sides, the stores and the dark apartments over the stores, and also the north side of town across from the railroad tracks, where the houses were smaller with frequent vacant lots in between, where the houses were painted blue or yellow or pale green and might have chickens in the back lots in wire pens and here and there dogs on chains and also car bodies rusting among the cheatweed and redroot under the low-hanging mulberry trees. ²

As Victoria returns to Holt on the bus from Denver she views the country outside the town at dusk thus:

...The country all flat and sandy again, the stunted stands of trees at the isolated farmhouses, the gravel section roads running exactly north and south like lines drawn in a child’s picture book and the four-stand fences rimming the bar ditches, and now there were cows and fresh calves in the pastures behind the barbed-wire fences and here and there a red mare with a new-foaled colt, and far away on the horizon to the south the low sandhills that looked as blue as plums. The winter wheat was the only green. ³

Holt is truly a small town that has remained a small town.

1. Design Conference Notes, p. 1.

2. Haruf, p. 14.

3. Haruf, p. 241-42.

Plainsong Design Conference Notes. Denver: Denver Center Theatre Company, June 2007.

Haruf, Kent. *Plainsong*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999.

Yuma County, Colorado

“We have smelled the tangy sage and have heard the drumroll of the grouse. We have seen rain fall like a song on fields that were dying. We have heard beauty crying like a silver flute. We have lived on the plains of eastern Colorado.”¹

So writes Mrs. Hal Russell about Yuma, Colorado in 1886, the town that, according to director Kent Thompson, could well give its image to the Holt of *Plainsong*. Mrs. Russell claims to be the first white child born in what is now Yuma County, and her book, *Settler Mac and the Charmed Quarter-Section*, is a hymn to the “drowsy, prairies, the beloved trails, the sacred land of our childhood” which was first dubbed the Great American Desert by early explorers.²

She recalls experiences with sodhouses, grasshoppers, dry weather, tornadoes, blizzards, starvation and poverty. She turns up her nose at Wray, the County seat, named in honor of John Wray, foreman “for a bunch of cutthroats at the Olive Ranch.”³

“Wray they named it,” she lamented, “and Wray it is, to this day.”⁴

Yuma County in 2005 has grown appreciably from Mrs. Russell’s memoirs of 1886. The population of the whole county is 9,789—32% urban and 68% rural, over three fourths white and the rest Hispanic. The urban residents live in the “three cities:” Yuma, Wray and Eckley, and the four towns: Akron, Otis, Haigler, and St. Francis.⁵ The population density is four people per square mile, termed “very low” by city data.com. The estimated median household income in 2005 was \$35, 593 compared to \$50, 653 for the state of Colorado. Crime is extremely low with no murders, rapes or robberies reported, and only three assaults, three burglaries and eight thefts in 2004.

The number of students going to college in 2005 was 225. Most residents are high school graduates with about 15% possessing college degrees.

Most people make their living from some form of agriculture. The average size of a farm is 1567 acres with corn, wheat, soybeans and vegetables

as the primary crops, while ranchers raise prime livestock and poultry. The average number of cattle and calves per 100 acres of all land in farms is 19.34 animals (more than people). Families operate 85% of the farms and the average age of the principal farm operator is 53.

Some residents moved to Yuma County from other countries; some relocated from other counties in Colorado, while others came from neighboring states. In contrast, 7.87% of the county’s residents moved elsewhere, to other countries, other states or other counties in Colorado. The births per 1,000 population in 2000-2003 were 13.6 babies while the deaths numbered 10.6 individuals. There was a population decrease in the 1960s and 70s but the 1990s and 2000s have seen some growth.

Yuma County residents like to stay in one residence: 59% have lived in the same house for five years or more. The median price of vacant-for-sale houses in 2000 was \$34,400—extremely low compared to Denver. As for education, most students attend the public schools: only 63 pupils in grades 1-8 attend private schools and just 3 go to a private high school.

Most of the county’s government finances go for highway maintenance (\$1,493,000) followed by welfare and police protection. Libraries are at the bottom of the list with an allocation of only \$25,000 a year.

Whatever conclusions one may draw about Yuma, remember these words of Mrs. Russell: “Places they say, like people, have souls.”⁶

1. Russell, p. 13.
2. Russell, p. 12.
3. Russell, p. 53.
4. Russell, p. 54.
5. Yuma County data, p. 5.
6. Russell, p. 12.

http://www.city-data.com/county/Yuma_County_CO.html

Russell, Mrs. Hal. *Settler Mac and the Charmed Quarter-Section*. Denver: Sage Books, 1956.

A Town Versus a Small Town

According to Wikipedia, a town is a “community ranging from a few hundred to several thousand.”¹ *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines a town as a “population center larger than a village but smaller than a city.”² In the United States the definition of the term “town” varies from state to state. In some states a town is an incorporated municipality, one with a charter received from the state similar to that given a city. In others, a town is unincorporated. For example, everyone in New York State who does not live on an Indian reservation or a city lives in a town or possibly in one of the town’s hamlets or villages.

In California, the words “town” and “city” are synonymous by law and occasionally, the residents are confused as to what to call it. For example, the sign in front of the municipal offices in Colma, California, reads “City of Colma” but the words engraved on the building’s front entrance reads “Town of Colma”. Some signs at the municipal corporation limit welcome visitors to the “City of Colma,” while older adjacent signs alert people to the “Town of Colma.”

The US Census Bureau refuses to define a small town but a “population of 25,000 constitutes a city and 2500 to 25,000 is a place.”³ However, the

state of Colorado is very definite; a city or a town may have from 1000 to 6000 residents while a very small town is one with “less than 1000 people.”⁴

Among the 140 candidates for very small towns in Colorado are: Avondale (754), Boone (323), Central City (575), Dillon (802), Swank (696) and Ouray (813).

“Only in a place like this [a small town] can you have a conversation with a misdialled phone number.”⁵”

1. Wikipedia, p. 1.
2. Morris, ed., p. 1359.
3. www.johnclaytonbooks.com
4. www.city-data.com
5. www.johnclaytonbooks.com

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/town>

<http://www.johnclaytonbooks.com/chap1.html>

www.city-data.com/city/CO3.html

Morris, William, ed. *The American Heritage Dictionary*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Co., 1979.

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Grover's Corners versus Holt, Colorado

“Kent Thompson thinks the play [*Plainsong*] is a kind of *Our Town* of our times with a strong Colorado connection. Kent is drawn to the lyrical sparseness and the non-sentimentalization of the work.”

—Design Conference Notes. ¹

Our *Town* and *Plainsong* are both unsentimental pictures of small towns that begin with characters' descriptions of the morning sky. In *Our Town* the Stage Manager says: “The sky is beginning to show some streaks of light over in the East there, behind our mount' in.” ² In *Plainsong*, Guthrie is at the back window of his kitchen and a Narrator remarks: “For a while he watched the increased reddening of sunrise along the steel blades of the windmill.” ³

The Stage Manager is the sole character who tells us about Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, in the years between 1901 and 1913. In contrast, several residents of Holt inform us about their small town in the 1980s. In *Our Town* Thornton Wilder focuses on the lives of real American families and the routines they follow as they go through daily life. For example, the Gibbs and Webb families live next door to each other; both are composed of a father, mother and two children. In *Plainsong* we see no “typical” American family. Tom Guthrie becomes a single father after his wife leaves; Victoria lives with a single mother and becomes one; the McPheron brothers exist on an isolated farm; Maggie Jones and Judy are single, divorced women. The “typical” family presented is the argumentative, bullying, vengeful Beckmans.

The “scandal” of Grover's Corners is Simon Stimson, the church organist who is an alcoholic and the subject of gossip for the ladies of the choir. In Holt, Buster is the town drunk who experiences more damage from detox and anti-depressants than from drink. Unlike Grover's Corners the people we meet in Holt have late 20th century problems: besides alcoholism, there is mental depression, abandonment, isolation, loneliness, teen-age pregnancy, unruly adolescent behavior and bullying. With all this fodder for gossip, the audience

hears only Mrs. Beckman's crude remark about Victoria, and Schramm's sexual innuendo about the McPhérons and Victoria.

In *Our Town*, the Stage Manager seems cynical about some individuals, perhaps a reflection of Thornton Wilder's confrontation with the darker side of reality. For example, Joe Crowell was a bright student who graduated from Massachusetts Tech with a degree in engineering, but he died in France in World War I. “All that education for nothing,” remarks the Stage Manager. ⁴ In lauding Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb for their cooking, cleaning and nurturing over the years, he concludes his tribute with “and never a nervous breakdown.” ⁵ As the minister who marries George and Emily, he is not sure he believes in marriage. But the harshest judgment on life is voiced by Simon Stimson in Act III. He committed suicide by hanging himself and now tells the deceased Emily: “That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those of those about you.” ⁶

Our Town ends with the funeral of Emily Gibbs and the thoughts that we don't appreciate life while we live it. Then the Stage Manager wishes us “Good Night.”

Plainsong's finale is a paean to life. At the McPheron house on Memorial Day, a party celebrates the birth of Victoria's baby and the beginning of spring. As everyone begins to sit down, Harold says: “All of you here tonight be welcome!” ⁷

1. Design Conference Notes, p. 1.

2. Wilder, p. 4.

3. Schmiedl, p.1.

4. Wilder, p. 9.

5. Wilder, p. 49.

6. Wilder, p. 109.

7. Schmiedl, p. 139.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Our_Town

Plainsong Design Conference Notes. Denver: Denver Center Theatre Company, June 2007.

Schmiedl, Eric. *Plainsong*. Draft 7.

Wilder, Thornton. *Our Town*. New York: Harper Collins, 1965.

A Great Change in the Great Plains

The Great Plains, long known as the nation's breadbasket, remains the primary source of wheat for the United States, along with flax seed, sorghum, sunflower, barley, corn, cattle and cotton. Despite population losses in many areas and several years of severe drought, the total acres of corn, soybean and wheat in Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Montana are up 7.2 million acres since 1950 to 48.3 million acres.

But the Great Plains—about 15% of the USA's land area but just 3% of the nation's population—are going through a transformation. "The more rural parts of the region gradually are adapting to a century of decline in farming and the steady exodus of young people."¹ Many parts of the Plains that have suffered economic hardships are turning back to nature: land preservation, eco-tourism, wildlife products, hunting grounds and recreational ranches.

After predictions by East Coast professors Frank and Deborah Popper that population losses in the area would be so extreme that the government would take over large expanses of the region, the private sector, state and local governments and non-profit agencies finally woke up. They began pouring money into preserving land and returning it to wild life.

"...Economic enterprises are emerging from this environmental effort...from bison and dried fruit snacks produced by Native Americans in South Dakota to Lewis and Clark Trail motor-coach tours in Nebraska."²

The suggestions that people stop farming were fighting words to some families who had survived the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. Many say: "Well, my grandparents settled here and they farmed, therefore I should be able to farm and my grandchildren should be able to farm."³ But the mind-set is changing. Christine Hamilton, a profitable fourth generation rancher explains: "We have to be creative and help local people understand eco-tourism, pheasant hunting and how to make these activities businesses for themselves."⁴

Environmentalists are pleased that the government's Conservation Reserve Program took 3.6 million acres of farmland out of production and converted it to grass, trees, wildlife cover or other uses to provide environmental benefits. Leaders are working with state and federal agencies to manage the land and preserve millions of acres that would create a reserve larger than Yellowstone National Park.

In addition, young people are returning to the area because of the Internet and information technology. These "new homesteaders" move to rural areas because the computer allows them to work wherever they want to live. For example, Jeremy and Melissa Sobolik moved back from California in 2004; he became a supervisor at a private airport in Fargo, North Dakota, and she works for Northern Great Plains, Inc., a regional not-for-profit group. Despite the assumptions that there are no economic opportunities in the area, openings are emerging in energy oil, wind, solar, bio-fuels and tourism.

"It's got to be better economically, even if it's a gamble, than the continued slow leak decline," Professor Popper says. "It's got to be better than things like casinos, prisons and hazardous waste dumps. What we've got is a Plan B for a region whose Plan A has been failing it for well over a century."⁵

1. El Nasser, p. 1.
2. El Nasser, p. 1.
3. El Nasser, p. 1.
4. El Nasser, p. 1.
5. El Nasser, p. 5.

El Nasser, Haya. "Life on the Great Plains is Anything but Plain, Simple." USA Today. www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2007-08-12-great_plains

O'Driscoll, Patrick. "Great Plains Wilt and Worry as Drought Eases Elsewhere?"

USA Today. www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-11-10_drought

The Burr and Hamilton Duel

On July 11, 1804, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr met on the dueling grounds at Weehawken, New Jersey, to fight the final skirmish of a long-lived political and personal battle. When the duel was over, Hamilton would be mortally wounded and Burr would be wanted for murder.

Hamilton was a Federalist; Burr was a Democratic-Republican and they clashed repeatedly in the political field. The first major clash was in 1791, when Burr successfully captured a United States Senate seat from Philip Schuyler, Hamilton's powerful father-in-law. Hamilton, then Secretary of the Treasury, would have counted on Schuyler to support his policies. When Burr was elected, Hamilton was furious.

In 1800 Burr obtained and had published "The Public Conduct and Character of John Adams, Esq., President of the United States," a document written by Hamilton that was highly critical of Adams. It had been intended for private circulation, but its publication proved embarrassing to Hamilton and widened rifts in the Federalist Party. That same year, when Republicans Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson tied in balloting for the presidency, Hamilton lobbied the House of Representatives to decide the election in Jefferson's favor. Hamilton's campaign had little effect, but in the end, Jefferson emerged the winner.

It was the New York governor's race of 1804, however, that pushed the two men to violence. In that election Burr turned his back on the Republicans and ran as an independent because he believed that if he won, he would regain power. The prospect of Burr leading New York mortified Hamilton, who despised and mistrusted Burr completely, and he tried to convince New York Federalists not to support Burr.

Although Hamilton's campaign was probably not the deciding factor, the Burr campaign failed. Burr was crushed in the general election by Morgan Lewis, the Republican candidate, who was supported by George and DeWitt Clinton, powerful New York Republicans.

The battle for New York had been a bruising one, but in the end, a relatively minor slight precipitated the Burr-Hamilton duel. In February 1804, a New York Republican, Dr. Charles D. Cooper, attended a dinner party at which Alexander Hamilton spoke forcefully and eloquently against Burr. Cooper then wrote a letter to Philip Schuyler in which he made reference to a particularly "despicable opinion" Hamilton had expressed about Burr. The letter was published in a New York newspaper, *The Albany Register*. Had Hamilton apologized for this "despicable opinion" of Mr. Burr, all probably would have been forgiven.

Hoping that a victory on the dueling ground could revive his flagging political career, Burr challenged Hamilton to a duel. Hamilton wanted to avoid the duel, but politics left him no choice. If he admitted to Burr's charge, which was substantially true, he would lose his honor. If he refused to duel, the result would be the same. Either way, his political career would be over.

After Hamilton's and Burr's seconds tried without success to settle the matter amicably, the two politicians proceeded to the dueling grounds of Weehawken on the morning of July 11. Each fired a shot from a .56 caliber dueling pistol. Burr was unscathed; Hamilton fell to the ground mortally wounded and died the next day.

Burr was charged with murder in New York and New Jersey, but neither charge reached trial. Burr fled to South Carolina, where his daughter lived with her family, but soon returned to Washington, D.C. to complete his term of service as Vice-President. He presided over the Samuel Chase impeachment trial with dignity and impartiality. Burr's heartfelt farewell speech in March 1805 moved some of his harshest critics in the Senate to tears.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/duel/peoplevents/pande17.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr-Hamilton_duel

Plainsong

Activities and Questions for Educators

Newspaper Reporter

Goal: Write an article about a scene that transpired on stage

Materials: Pen and Paper

1. The students are newspaper reporters from the small town of Holt. The reporters are to write a short article about one of the incidents from the play *Plainsong*.
2. Be sure to be able to answer the questions of who the article is about, what happened, where the incident happened, and why.
3. Rather than having the article cover only the facts, have the article be an editorial.
 - a. Remember that an editorial is opinionated.
 - b. After writing one side of the opinion, write the counterpoint.

CO Reading and Writing 4: Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

CO Reading and Writing 6: Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.

Adapting Plainsong

Materials: Pen and paper

1. Start by picking a scene from the play *Plainsong*. After reading the scene, find some key themes and character choices that you can adapt from the script to a paragraph.
2. From this scene, transform what transpires on stage into a couple of paragraphs describing what happens and what the characters do actively on the stage. If you have seen the play, describe what the actors did on stage.
3. Once the first draft is written, find some areas that you can embellish. Look for moments where you can expound upon what each character is feeling or thinking in your adaptation. Are there other areas from the play that you could build upon?
4. Discuss how it was to adapt what you read or saw in the play to paragraphs. What were some of the obstacles that you faced? Why do you think it would be easier or more difficult to adapt the novel into a play?

CO Reading and Writing 2: Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences.

CO Reading and Writing 4: Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

CO Theatre 2: Students understand and apply the creative process to skills of storytelling, playwriting, acting, and directing.

Plainsong

Activities and Questions for Educators

Environment Builder

1. Two participants face an audience. The audience is asked to suggest an environment (ex. Beach, amusement park, etc).
2. One at a time each participant says a sentence describing the environment using one of the five senses (I taste..., I touch..., I smell..., I see..., I hear...).
3. If a participant hesitates or repeats something that has already been said, the erring participant dies by the last thing spoken. For example, if one participant says “I hear the wind,” and the other participant hesitates, he/she must act out death by wind.
4. Once the participants understand the rules, use settings from the play, *Plainsong*. (The diner, the farm, the school, Denver, Holt, etc.)

CO Reading and Writing 2: Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences.

CO Reading and Writing 6: Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience.

Discussion Questions

1. Why doesn't Mama help Victoria? How does she deal with her daughter's ordeal?
2. Why does Crowder want Guthrie to pass Russell Beckham?
3. What do you think is wrong with Ella? How does she think she is able to solve her problem?
4. What does Mrs. Stearns want from the Guthrie boys?
5. Why does Maggie help Victoria?
6. Why do Harold and Raymond take Maggie in?
 - a. What do you think the two bachelors are scared to have Victoria live with?
 - b. Why is Victoria scared to live with them?
 - c. How do the characters connect and find common ground?
 - d. How do the Brothers change from the beginning of the play to the end of the play?
7. How do Ike and Bobby feel about their mother leaving their father? Does this attitude change during the play?
8. How is Denver and its inhabitants portrayed that is different than Holt and its inhabitants?
9. Why does Victoria go to Denver with Dwayne?
10. How does Victoria react to Denver?
11. How do you feel about Sharlene and Murphy when they help Dwayne to torment the Guthrie brothers?