

**ALMOST HISTORY:  
THAT WHOLE  
SPACE-TIME  
CONTINUUM THING**

A COMEDY IN TWO ACTS BY  
*Treanor Wooten Baring*



**CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE**

## Introduction

A reporter and a sidekick livestream from great moments in American history.

## Playwright Bio

Treanor Wooten Baring is currently a freelance writer, blogger, and editor. She began her professional arts career as a television producer/director and script editor with public television in Mississippi and Massachusetts and has a master's degree from the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. She has won national and regional poetry awards, including the Emma K. Lytle Portfolio Award from the Museum of the Mississippi Delta.

## Background

The premiere production took place in 2014 at Cornerstone Academy, a Spring Branch Independent School District middle school in Houston, TX.

## Synopsis

In a hilarious series of time-traveling misadventures, a reporter and a sidekick livestream from great moments in American history. Despite the über-scientist sidekick's best efforts to keep the clueless reporter out of trouble, they change the course of history and return to a comically chaotic present. Even Einstein and Marie Curie cannot undo the disastrous effects of their mishaps. Eventually, they save democracy and technology by restoring order to "that whole space time continuum thing."

## Characters

**MEDIA MIKE:** Larger-than-life celebrity talk show host. Flashy, loud, and prone to exaggeration. Totally over the top.

**SANDRA:** Television investigative reporter interested in getting a scoop and having a hit show, excitable and energetic.

**MELVIN:** Total science nerd...I mean dude...introverted but confident.

**CODY:** Typical teenager, nonchalant and blasé, they don't want to learn anything they don't have to.

**JESS:** Typical teenager, nonchalant and blasé, they don't want to learn anything they don't have to.

**ASSISTANT PRODUCER:** Ambitious, outgoing, and hyper television assistant producer.

**PRODUCER:** Behind-the-scenes boss of the television production company. Matter-of-fact and efficient.

**LA PINTA NAVIGATOR:** The most important person on Columbus' ship besides the captain. Of noble birth, well educated and proud, a snob.

**THOMAS JEFFERSON:** You all know who THOMAS JEFFERSON is, right? Proud, arrogant, and a little childish.

**BEN FRANKLIN:** The oldest of the founding fathers, and won't let anyone forget it.

**JOHN ADAMS:** Again, you probably know a lot about John Adams. Short, bald, ornery.

**ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL:** The inventor himself.

**THOMAS WATSON:** Assistant to Bell. A perfect gentleman.

**MICHAEL COLLINS:** Astronaut from the 1960s. Never walked on the moon. Still important!

**NEIL ARMSTRONG:** First man on the moon.

**BUZZ ALDRIN:** Second man on the moon. Still quite the achievement!

**COMMAND CONTROL:** NASA engineer back on Earth.

**PYTHAGORAS:** Mathematical genius with a theorem named after him.

**EINSTEIN:** Mathematical genius with a lot to say about general relativity.

**MARIE CURIE:** Scientist, two-time Nobel winner. A glowing personality.

**MARY SHELLEY:** Author of Frankenstein. Knows better than anyone that Frankenstein was the scientist, not the monster.

**MS. WOOD:** The brilliant 8th grade history teacher who saves the day.

**MS. SMETEK:** The beautiful English teacher everyone adores.

**HEAD OF IMPERIAL GUARDS:** Society soldier.

**FANS 1, 2, and 3:** Fawning middle school students. Aspiring rappers.

**CHORUS (4–7):** Media Mike audience, television crew, La Pinta crewmates, congressional congress, imperial guards.

## Themes

Technology, memory, personal responsibility

## Pre-Read Questions

- ★ How can we stop history from repeating itself?
- ★ Do you believe it is important to learn history? Why or why not?
- ★ What is your favorite subject in school?
- ★ Do you like history class? Why or why not?
- ★ Name a teacher that has impacted your life. How did they impact you?
- ★ If you could visit any time period which would it be and why?

## Pre-Read Activities

### History Research

- ★ Divide students into groups and assign each group a historical figure that appears in the play (e.g., Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams). Have students research the historical figure:
  - » Why are they an important figure in history?
  - » When and where were they born?
  - » What major societal contributions do we see from them today?
  - » What is their most notable achievement?
  - » What politics did they believe in?
- ★ Decide how students will present their knowledge. For example:
  - » Oral presentation
  - » Written response
  - » Slide deck

### Dinner with History

- ★ Pick five students to up at a time for this improv game. Tell students they are going to be hosting a dinner party with historical figures. The catch is the person who is hosting the dinner party does not know which historical figures are going to appear.
- ★ Have one student from the five go outside so they cannot hear what historical figure each student is choosing.
- ★ Once the students have chosen, have the dinner host enter the room. They should start the scene by improvising that they are setting up for the dinner party and are excited for their guests to come.

- ★ The first historical figure will knock on the door and the dinner host will let them into the room. They should not introduce themselves by name, but rather should act like their historical figure. For example, if a student was Ben Franklin they could walk in talking about their kite.
- ★ Each historical figure will take a turn entering the space. Once the dinner host believes they know who a historical figure is they will take a guess by asking if that is their name. If the student is correct, the historical figure will exit the scene. This will continue until the dinner host has guessed all the historical figures at the dinner party.

### **History Jeopardy**

- ★ Look up quotes from and facts about historical figures mentioned in the play (e.g., Einstein, Marie Curie, John Adams).
- ★ Divide students into two teams and tell them they are going to play Jeopardy. Students will pick a category from the board (e.g., Quotes, Accomplishments, Identify the Picture) and answer the question.
- ★ If the team cannot answer the question, the other team will get a chance to score points.
- ★ The team with the most points by the end of the game wins!

### **Create An Invention**

- ★ Throughout history, many things that we use today were invented (e.g., electricity, telephones, laptops).
- ★ Tell students that they are going to create their own inventions today. Students should start out by drawing and drafting the idea for their invention on paper.
- ★ Once students draw their idea, provide them with construction paper, modeling clay, or any creative supplies you have available in the classroom.

- ★ Give students time to create their inventions. Once they finish, have them present their creations to the class. Discuss:
  - » What did you create?
  - » What inspired your invention?
  - » How can we use this invention in today's society?
  - » Why is your invention important?

### **Livestream Scene**

- ★ Divide students into groups and tell them to create a 1–2-minute stream about a live stream they would create. It can be about history or the theme of their choosing.
- ★ After students have written their scenes, have them perform group by group.
- ★ After students perform discuss:
  - » What stood out to you when watching other scenes?
  - » What similarities and differences did you see within scenes?
  - » Do you enjoy live streaming or watching live streams? Why or why not?
  - » What social media platform do you watch live streams on (Tiktok, YouTube, Instagram)?

### **Social Media Monologue**

- ★ Have students write a monologue about social media. It can be about the impact of social media or they can write a monologue as if they were a social media platform. Allow students to get creative with their monologues.
- ★ Once students are done writing, have them present their monologues and then discuss:
  - » How has social media impacted you?

- » Are you a fan of social media? Why or why not?
- » How would you define being an influencer? Do you watch any influencers? Who?

## Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Almost History: that whole space time continuum thing*, individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

### Read One: What is happening?

1. Who is Walter Kronkite?
2. Where do Melvin and Sandra go first when they time travel?
3. What does Sandra think the crew is doing? What does Melvin say they are actually doing?
4. How does what happened on Columbus' ship affect the present day?
5. What happens to the Declaration of Independence?
6. Why do the phones stop working?
7. Why don't people remember who Michael Collins is?



8. Why does the assistant producer speak in a different language from everyone else?
9. Who are the greatest minds of history Melvin brings forward to help save Earth?
10. Who comes up with the plan that fixes history?
11. True or False: Sandra does not pass her history exam.
12. What is the key idea of the play?

### **Read Two: How is it happening?**

1. How are Melvin and Sandra foils to one another? Cite examples from the text to support your answer.
2. How does the playwright transition between the past and present? How does that affect how you visualize the story from the audience's perspective?
3. Compare and contrast Cody & Jess' use of language to Melvin & Sandra's. How is it similar? How is it different? How does it help you visualize the characters and their relationships to one another?
4. What is the significance of the line, "When people don't learn history, they end up repeating it"?
5. In your opinion, why does the playwright choose to break the fourth wall towards the end of the play?
6. How does the playwright use irony in the last scene of the play? Cite the text to support your answer.

### **Read Three: Why is it happening?**

1. What is the playwright trying to say about learning from history? Cite the text to support your answer.
2. How do you think the playwright decided what historical moments to include? What common theme did you see throughout all the historical moments?

3. Think of the quote “Knowledge is power” by Francis Bacon. How does it apply to this play?
4. How does the author want you to respond to the play?

## **Post-Read Questions**

- ★ What is one question you still have about the play?
- ★ Do you believe there was a hero in this story? Who?
- ★ Did any of the scenes remind you of something you learned in history class? Which one(s)?
- ★ Which historical figure was your favorite? Why?
- ★ Is there any other time in history you would add to the play? Which one and why?

## **Post-Read Activities**

### **Write Your Own History Rap**

- ★ As a class reread the history rap in Act II Scene 7. Then divide students into groups and tell them they are going to create their own verse to add to the rap. It can be about the historical time period of their choosing.
- ★ Tell students the rap should only be about 30 to 60 seconds long.
- ★ Once students are done, have them share their rap with the class.

### **Time Travel Scene**

- ★ Divide students into groups and tell them they are going to create a 1–2-minute scene where they travel back to a time they chose.
- ★ Have students explore what happens when they travel to that time period. What goes wrong? How do they fix it?

- ★ Once students devise their scene, have them perform. Discuss after performances:
  - » Why did you choose that time period or historical event?
  - » What did you change about that time period or historical event? Did you change it for the better or for the worse?
  - » What challenged you while creating these scenes? How did you overcome those challenges?

### **Historical Monologue**

- ★ Tell students to pick a historical figure. It does not have to be one that was in the play.
- ★ Once students have chosen their historical figure, tell them to write a one-minute monologue on how that character would react to today's society. What would they say? What values would they push? What change would they want to create?
- ★ Once students are done writing their monologues, have them present. Once everyone presents, discuss:
  - » What was it like stepping into that historical figure's shoes?
  - » How did that historical figure react to today's society?
  - » What challenges did you face when modernizing this historical figure? How did you overcome those challenges?
  - » Did anything surprise you as you wrote your monologue? If so, what did?

### **Save the World**

- ★ Divide students into groups and tell them they are going to create their own plan to save the world after Melvin and Sandra changed history.
- ★ Students will create and write down their plan to present to the class. This plan can be as silly or as realistic as the students would like. Encourage them to get creative with it.

- ★ Once students are done have them present and discuss their plan:
  - » Why do they believe their plan will work?
  - » What was the hardest challenge they faced when devising this plan? How did they overcome the challenge?
  - » What is their favorite part of their plan? Why?
- ★ Once everyone has presented, have students discuss and vote on which plan they would choose as a class to save the world. Allow students to debate and discuss as they vote. Students should have a reasoning behind the plan they vote for.

### **Historical Tableau**

- ★ Have students research and pick out a famous quote about history that they believe relates to the play.
- ★ Students should know who said the quote and what the context of the quote is.
- ★ Once students pick their quote, have them discuss why they chose it. How does it apply to the play? What is it trying to say?
- ★ After students discuss their quotes, divide them into groups. Have each group create a tableau for their quotes that they will present to the class. It can be one tableau that incorporates all of their quotes or a series of tableaux that transitions from one quote to another.
- ★ After presentations you can hang these quotes around your room to remind students about the importance of our history!

### **Character Costume Design**

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colors and textures would they choose?

## Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward:
  - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
  - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
  - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

## **Playwright Process**

*Playwright Treanor Baring talks about her process writing Almost History: that whole space time continuum thing. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.*

## What was the inspiration for writing this play?

I love time travel stories. My sons were learning American History in middle school (shout out to the real Ms. Wood!) and it struck me that we owe so much of our modern life to people in the past. My husband is a physicist and he often gets asked, "What does theoretical research have to do with everyday life?" His answer is, "Drive home, turn on your lights, and I'll text you the answer." History is the same. Our lives would be very different if the events of the past had played out differently. So, I messed with that idea in the play. And I wanted to write a comedy that celebrated American history.

### **What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?**

Deciding what events to include. And how to honor the complexities of our history. There are so many people in the past who devoted or gave up their lives to make this country better. It can be a little mind-blowing to think about just how many real heroes there are in our history. In the end, I decided to focus on a few main events that have had a direct influence on our day-to-day lives now, like our freedoms, and our phones. And are recognizable. So I had to leave out a lot of good stuff.

### **What was it like to see the play performed?**

The most fantastic thing about the premier was to see how much fun the actors and crew had with the play. They went all out with the goofiness. I have to admit, after a read-through, I got a little push-back from the teens about Cody and Jess's screen addictions. And that's how the line about being written by a mom got in there. To say, yeah, I get it, the message about getting off your screens is a little mom-ery. But then they loved the "you mean they're even more out of date than our parents?" line, so we called it even.

### **As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play and why?**

I really like when Ms. Smetek comes on stage to explain willing suspension of disbelief. By then, the plot had started to get a little crazy, so I wrote that scene to engage the audience directly, to say, yeah, we're not gonna take ourselves too seriously here, let's just go with the craziness. Even now, when we see a movie that seems implausible, we'll say, "Ms. Smetek, we need you!" And I like how the main characters say, "What audience?" so that the fourth wall is broken for us, but not for them.

### **Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?**

The first draft. There is the blank page. Staring at you. Where to start? And once you start, you have to keep filling in the blank pages. What happens if you hit a wall? (Take-out Pizza time) With rewriting, you have something to work with.

## **What's your writing process like?**

I'm a "deep dive" writer. I get completely in the zone. Sometimes, it feels like I'm just taking dictation from some other part of my brain. I'm typing as fast as I can before it goes away. I can forget to eat. It's actually the best feeling. But then, when I'm done, it can be a mess. So I do spend a lot of time revising. I put the first draft away for a bit. I read it aloud. And it helps to have someone else read it. I might think something works that doesn't and I have to let it go. I don't take any criticisms personally because the point is to make the writing better. I've learned not to be overprotective of that first draft.

## **What engages you about playwriting?**

You're writing down conversation, but there has to be a plot, some dramatic conflict, and meaning beyond, "What do you want for breakfast?" Although, come to think of it, that would be a fun prompt! A play production is such a collaborative effort, the cast and crew enable the words to take flight from off the page and fly around free. The words aren't stuck on the paper (or screen) anymore. Other people have brought them to life. That's way cool.