

The American Place Theatre
Literature to Life

A Workshop Based on

Coming Through

Adapted and Directed by Wynn Handman



A Teacher Resource guide

This resource guide is a project of The American Place Theatre. It has been designed for teachers of grades seven through twelve. Its objective is to introduce drama-in-education strategies and activities that can be implemented in the classroom by the classroom teacher. It is designed as a pre and post workshop guide in hopes of furthering the Literature to Life experience for all who attend.

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Ellis Island: A Brief Chronology

According to Ellis Island & Statue of Liberty Magazine, a publication made available to visitors of Ellis Island, 40% of all living Americans, or approximately 100 million people, can trace their roots to an ancestor who came through Ellis Island. Fleeing hardships such as poverty, religious persecution, or political unrest in their homelands, emigrants journeyed to the United States in search of freedom and opportunity. More than 70% landed in New York, the country's largest port.

Three historical events precipitated large migrations from Europe to the U.S. in the 19th century: the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the potato famines of Ireland in the 1840's and the rapidly changing economic environment caused by the industrial revolution during the 18th and 19th centuries. As a result, the nineteenth century saw a steady increase in the number of people emigrating to America: 150,000 during the 1820's; 1.7 million during the 1840's; 2.5 million during the 1850's.

Prior to 1890, the processing of immigrants in this country was handled by both federal and state authorities. However, an investigation of abuses in New York in 1887 concluded that the local administration was taking advantage of incoming foreigners. This led to a recommendation by the investigative committee that the responsibility of immigration regulation be assumed by the federal government only. On April 11, 1890, William Windom, the Secretary of the Treasury and federal official in charge of immigration, made the decision to build a new receiving station in New York harbor. Ellis Island was eventually designated for this purpose. After two years and a cost of \$150,000, Ellis Island opened on January 1, 1892.

The passage of stricter immigration laws between 1892 and 1900, along with the assumption of federal control of immigration, had the effect of reducing the number of aliens coming to the United States in the last decade of the nineteenth century. A nationwide depression and a cholera scare had additional impact. Presumably, word of growing economic hardship in the United States spread to foreign countries and discouraged the poor from migrating at that time.

In 1887, a disastrous fire broke out on Ellis Island. Fortunately, only 200 people were on the island at the time and no one was hurt. But within three hours, the buildings burned to the ground. Congress appropriated \$600,000 to replace the lost structures with fireproof buildings. On December 17, 1900, Ellis Island reopened as an immigration station on a larger scale.

But even this renovated station was inadequate to accommodate the high numbers of immigrants coming through Ellis Island between 1900 and 1910. 1907 brought the United States' peak year of immigration with more than 1,150,000 people being admitted at Ellis Island. Even with a staff of approximately 350 civil servants, the station could not process all who arrived in a single day. New arrivals would sometimes stay on board ships at port for four days before disembarking.

Regulations for the screening of immigrants changed over the decades, but essentially all new arrivals underwent medical and legal examinations, during which immigration officials inquired about relatives in the U.S., plans for the future, and means of support. If inspectors had legal questions or a doctor had concerns about a person's health, an individual could be detained or deported. Overall, most made it through within a few hours, 20 percent were detained for further questioning and observation, and two percent were deported.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1915, emigration to America subsided. Many European nations closed their borders, seas were unsafe for travel, and unemployment in America was on the rise. With the end of World War I, a new immigration law was passed, specifying 33 classes of foreigners who could not be admitted. This new law greatly reduced the number of immigrants for a time, but by 1921, the number of arrivals climbed to 500,000. Stricter laws were enacted in 1921 and 1924. Then a final revision in 1929 added a quota system, limiting the total number of immigrants allowed into the country. Another provision of the law stated that all immigrants were now to be inspected at American consular offices in the immigrant's country of origin, rather than on arrival in America. This changed the immigration system forever. With continual decreases in the number of immigrants processed at Ellis Island, the station closed in 1954.

Recognizing Ellis Island as part of our country's national heritage, President Johnson officially proclaimed it part of the Statue of Liberty National monument on May 11, 1965. In 1982, President Reagan initiated a private-sector, fundraising effort by Chrysler Corporation of America to restore Ellis Island. The largest restoration venture of its kind in American history, more than \$160 million in individual and corporate contributions were donated to the Ellis Island project. It reopened to visitors in September of 1990. Restored to the 1918-1924 period, half of the museum's exhibit space is devoted to the history of Ellis Island itself. The other half tells America's immigrant story from the arrival of this country's first immigrants to those arriving today.

Sources:

Benton, Barbara. Ellis Island: A Pictorial History, New York: Facts on File, 1985.

Pippenger, Ellen Bailey, ed. Ellis Island & Statue of Liberty Magazine. San Francisco: American Park Network, 1992.

The Ellis Island Oral History Program

The Ellis Island Oral History Project is dedicated to preserving the first-hand recollections of immigrants coming to America during the years Ellis Island was in operation: 1892-1954. Begun in 1973, the Project has grown over the years to include over 1500 interviews. Each interview includes an extensive examination of everyday life in the country of origin, family history, reasons for coming to America, the journey to the port, experiences on the ship, arrival and processing at the Ellis Island facility and an in-depth look at the adjustment to living in the United States.

All interviews are available as tapes and transcripts to researchers and interested members of the public. The exhibits in the museum rely heavily on quoted oral history material. Interviews from the Oral History Project have been used extensively in the United States and Europe for television and film documentaries, radio broadcasts, books, creative artworks and theatrical presentations.

Interviewees are chosen by the Project staff in a number of ways. The most common and useful method is called the "Oral History Form," a simple distributed at the museum and through the mail to interested parties. This form asks for an abbreviated immigration history of the potential interviewee with a space to include any other interesting stories or anecdotes. Other methods of locating interviewees include the cooperation of ethnic societies and community organizations, newspaper and magazine coverage of the Project, public appearances by the staff and word of mouth.

The interviewees are given the option of coming to the Ellis Island Immigration Museum to be interviewed at the recording studio there or to have a member of the Project staff visit their home using portable recording equipment. The running time of most interviews is approximately one hour. The interviews are eventually transcribed. Interviews are now added to a computer database that can be accessed in the Library at the Ellis Island Immigration Museum.

The interviews include people from dozens of countries, as well as former Ellis Island and Statue of Liberty employees, people stationed in the military on both islands and former island residents who were children at the time because a family member was an employee in some capacity. Interviewees presently live in most states in the continental United States as well as several foreign countries. Most interviewees are in their late eighties, the oldest to date being 106 and the youngest being 46.

For further information about the Ellis Island Oral History Project, please write to: Oral History Project, Ellis Island Immigration Museum, New York City, New York, 10004 or call (212) 363-3200, ext. 156 and fax (212) 363-6302.

On the Process of Creating Theatre

Coming Through is a production that originated from The American Place Theatre's *Offerings* program, established in 1994 by the Theatre's Director and Founder, Wynn Handman. The goal of this program is to "nurture theatre that recognizes its own unique liveness by engaging audience members as active participants in the performance."

Acting students from Mr. Handman's studio discovered the richness of the oral histories of Ellis Island immigrants and presented a venue for further experimentation with the material. An overwhelmingly positive response led Mr. Handman to conceive the idea of a full-length production based on these oral histories. The success of the full-length version led the Education Department to present ***Coming Through***, in the form you see now, as part of the Literature to Life program.

At the thematic center of ***Coming Through*** is the human struggle to survive, to find, and create a better life for oneself and one's family. As the title suggests, this struggle is depicted in the process of "coming through" Ellis Island into the United States. The resourcefulness and determination that define the spirit of the immigrant are illustrated in the play by depicting various phases of the journey beginning with an individual's personal reasons for leaving home, the voyage itself, and ending with the realities of a new life in the United States.

Among the greatest challenges of creating ***Coming Through*** was deciding which material to include in the piece. Mr. Handman studied hundreds of oral histories and gradually narrowed them down to three, which he felt represented a broad cross-section of the western European immigrant experience.

The oral histories selected for the play reveal the stories of people who emigrated in the years 1920-1924. History in part dictated this time frame; more people who emigrated at that time, than who came through during the pre-World War I era, were alive and able to be interviewed when Ellis Island's full-scale oral history project got underway in 1990. And, because the number of immigrants coming through Ellis Island declined after the early 1920's fewer oral histories exist from people who emigrated after that period.

Ultimately, Mr. Handman decided to maintain a unity of time in the play and chose to set the stories on an August day in 1922, a date within two years of when the real-life immigrants actually came through Ellis Island. The histories have been adapted and put in the present tense; lending a sense of immediacy to the production and making the audience feel part of the event rather than putting them in the position of detached spectators.

Workshops based on ***Coming Through***

Workshop One: REASONS FOR LEAVING HOME (Pre-show)

A. Discussion

Ask students to name some reasons why people might want to leave their native countries for a new land. Support this discussion with historical information. Perhaps a research assignment on the motivating factors for emigration to the U.S. in the 19th and early 20th centuries could precede the following activities.

B. Group Story Telling

Divide the class into groups of approximately five students, arranging each group in a small circle. Assign one of the photos on pages 10-11 to each group and ask them to look at it, imagining what factors motivated the person or people in the photo to emigrate to the United States. In addition to the larger political and socio-economic influences, encourage students to imagine personal reasons that could lead to such a move. One student in each circle initiates a story explaining the reasons. The story gets passed around the group, each member continuing where the previous person left off and finishing with the last member of the group.

C. Tableaux

Each group creates a tableau depicting the character or characters' reasons for leaving and shares it with the class. As each group presents its tableau, signal characters to speak their thoughts out loud by tapping them one-by-one on the shoulder.

D. Narration

The following passage can be used as a segue into activity "E." It is a historical account of the travelling conditions that many emigrants faced while journeying to America. Use it to narrate what happens to the emigrants in the students' stories.

Passengers were packed tightly, with no more than a few square feet of space per person. There were no latrines and no windows, so sanitation and ventilation were serious problems. All emigrants, regardless of class, had to suffer overcrowding and disorder, seasickness, a foul atmosphere, and poor food. A storm could make things much worse. With the ship pitching and creaking, decks awash, people sick everywhere, it was a miserable experience. *

*Benton, Barbara. Ellis Island: A Pictorial History, New York: Facts on File, 1985.

E. Journal Entry

Students choose an emigrant from their group's tableau and imagine his/her first few days on board a ship to America. In the voice of their chosen character, students write a journal entry while travelling at sea. The following questions can be used as guidelines:

- What are your expectations for the future?
- What are your thoughts about those you left behind?
- What would you advise others who are thinking of following you?
- Whom have you met in your travels so far?

Workshop Two: THE GOLDEN DOOR (Post-show)

A. Group Sculpture I - The Promise

Read Emma Lazarus' famous lines inscribed on the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor.

... "Give me your tired, your poor
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

Divide the class into three groups and ask each to create a "sculpture" with their bodies which reflects the ideas and feelings communicated in the above quotation. The "sculpture" may be realistic or abstract. As groups share their sculptures, you can ask the following questions to reflect on the work:

- ❖ What do we see?
- ❖ What feelings are communicated through the sculpture?
- ❖ Does the United States have a golden door?
- ❖ How did the characters in ***Coming Through*** feel upon arrival in the United States?
- ❖ How did the reality of their experiences compare with the promise inscribed on the Statue of Liberty?

B. Group Sculpture II - The Reality

Assign each of the groups a character from the play: Mary Cox, Salvatore Crossetti, or Manny Steen. Each group creates a "sculpture" which illustrates their character's actual experience upon arrival in the United States. Groups share their "sculptures."

C. Postcards

Provide each student with a blank postcard of New York City or a 3 x 5 card. In the written voice of their group's assigned character, students write a postcard to a family member or friend they left behind in their native countries. The postcard should express how they are coping with life in America.

Workshop Three: IMMIGRATION REGULATION (Pre- or Post-show)

In 1875, Congress made its first attempt to curb immigration in response to a growing population of Chinese workers in California. 1882 brought an even more restrictionist law known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, which stopped all Chinese immigration for 10 years and upheld a California law prohibiting citizenship for Chinese immigrants.

Debates over immigration regulation have continued in this country throughout the century. The second article on page 17 shows that even today there are no easy answers. The recent unrest in Haiti left thousands of political exiles homeless and seeking refuge in this country. The decision to return them to their homeland reignited the debate about the United States' responsibility to those seeking asylum.

Divide the class into two groups. One is assigned an anti-restrictionist point of view and the other a pro-restrictionist point of view. Using the following statements, the groups debate issues pertaining to immigration regulation:

- ❖ **THE UNITED STATES SHOULD LIVE UP TO ITS PROMISE OF THE GOLDEN DOOR.**
- ❖ **ONLY POLITICAL REFUGEES SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO ENTER THE UNITED STATES.**
- ❖ **IMMIGRANTS SHOULD PASS AN ENGLISH LITERACY TEST BEFORE BEING ALLOWED TO ENTER THIS COUNTRY.**
- ❖ **ANYBODY WHO WANTS TO COME TO THE UNITED STATES SHOULD BE ALLOWED.**
- ❖ **QUOTAS LIMITING THE NUMBER OF IMMIGRANTS FROM EACH COUNTRY MUST BE INSTITUTED.**

Workshop Four: ORAL HISTORIES of 1990'S IMMIGRANTS (Post-show)

A. Interviews

For homework, ask the students to interview a person in their school, family, or community who came to in New York from another country. The students should inquire about the person's reasons for leaving their native country, why s/he has chosen America as a new home, how s/he got here, how s/he has been treated in New York, and how s/he is coping. If possible, students should tape record their interviews.

B. Editing

Guide students through the process of editing their oral histories into dramatic monologues. The information on page 5 on the creation of ***Coming Through*** may be helpful in the development of the oral histories into performance pieces.

C. Performance

Students rehearse and perform their interviews as dramatic material. The "final" product may be a memorized piece or a staged reading (with scripts in hand) of the piece that the students have developed. Invite another class to view the performance.

Poems

No Irish Need Apply

Anonymous Song

I'm a decent boy just landed
From the town of Ballyfad;
I want a situation, yes,
And want it very bad.
I have seen employment advertised,
"It's just the thing," says I,
"But the dirty spalpeen ended with
'No Irish Need Apply.'"

"Whoa," says I, "that's an insult,
But to get the place I'll try,"
So I went to see the blackguard
With his "No Irish Need Apply."
Some do count it a misfortune
To be christened Pat or Dan,
But to me it is an honor
To be born an Irishman.

I started out to find the house,
I got it mighty soon;
There I found the old chap seated,
He was reading the Tribune.
I told him what I came for,
When he in a rage did fly,
"No!" he says, "You are a Paddy,
And no Irish need apply."

Then I gets my dander rising
And I'd like to black his eye
To tell an Irish gentleman
"No Irish Need Apply."
Some do count it a misfortune
To be christened Pat or Dan,
But to me it is an honor
To be born an Irishman.

I couldn't stand it longer
So a hold of him I took,
And gave him such a welting
As he'd get at Donnybrook.
He hollered, "Milia murther,"
And to get away did try,
And swore he'd never write again
"No Irish Need Apply."

Well he made a big apology,
I told him then goodbye,
Saying, "When next you want a
beating,
Write 'No Irish Need Apply.' "
Some do count it a misfortune
To be christened Pat or Dan,
But to me it is an honor
To be born an Irishman.

PROSPECTIVE IMMIGRANTS PLEASE NOTE

by Adrienne Rich (1962)

Either you will
go through this door
or you will not go through.

If you go through
there is always the risk
of remembering your name.

Things look at you doubly
and you must look back
and let them happen.

If you do not go through
it is possible
to live worthily

to maintain your attitudes
to hold your position
to die bravely

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?

The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.

EUROPE AND AMERICA

by David Ignatow

My father brought the emigrant bundle
of desperation and worn threads,
that in anxiety as he stumbles
tumble out distractedly;
while I am bedded upon soft green money
that grows like grass. Thus,
between my father who lives on a bed of anguish
for his daily bread, and who I tear money
at leisure by the roots,
where I lie in the sun or shade,
a vast continent of breezes, storms to him,
difficult channels to him, and hills,
mountains to him, lie between us.

My father comes of a hell
where bread and man have kneaded
and baked together. You have heard the scream
as the knife fell; while I slept
as guns pounded on the shore.

MY FATHER

By Rae Dalven

My father tore out his native roots
when middle-aged, unskilled, proud.
He sailed for this golden land
when it was quota-free, hope-
endowed.

He found a job in a factory
owned by a man from his own home
town;
his compatriot workers all spoke
Greek,
he enjoyed a clannish-renown.

And he sweated for a dollar a day
recalling his mother's lament,
"Are these all the drachmas you
earned today?"
A limited life, void of event.

And at night he'd amble across
to the coffee -house on Rivington
Street,
where the old and the new
would never, never meet.

And his oriental "amanedes"
soared in revel-release,
soaring him back in flight,
serenading his wife in Greece.

And he sent for his loved ones,
their passage he took on loan,
found a flat in a slum tenement,
started to work on his own.

Why did he fail?
Why was his presence fatherly
weak?
He couldn't learn the language they
spoke,
"They speak in English, I speak in
Greek!"

Inhospitable, suspicious
of the friends his children made,
"A shoe from our home town, let it be
patched!"
Out of his orbit afraid

This was my father,
this was our sin,
he couldn't come out,
we wouldn't give in.

Information on Ellis Island

Visiting the **Ellis Island Immigration Museum** can be a rich and rewarding experience for any school group. We suggest combining your trip to see ***Coming Through*** with a visit to Ellis Island. Ellis Island stands as a constant reminder of our nation's immigrant history. Located a few hundred yards north of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, Ellis Island is a monument to the great traditions of freedom and opportunity in America. The Museum tells the inspiring story of the largest human migration in modern history. Between 1892 and 1954, 12 million immigrants were processed at Ellis Island. Today more than 40% of all living Americans, or over 100 million people, can trace their roots to an ancestor who came through Ellis Island. The Museum offers visitors a fascinating look at the total immigrant experience, using innovative displays that feature historic artifacts and photos, interactive devices, computers and taped reminiscences of the immigrants themselves. The Ellis Island Immigration Museum as well as the exhibit in the base of the Statue of Liberty are fully accessible to persons with disabilities.

The historic Great Hall, the beautiful room where millions once waited anxiously for medical and legal processing. Two theatres, both featuring the award-winning film, "Island of Hope, Island of Tears" which tells the inspiring story of the millions of Ellis Island immigrants. A touching collection of artifacts donated to the museum by descendants of the immigrants who brought these Treasures From Homes to America. The collection includes priceless family heirlooms, religious articles, family photos, rare and beautiful clothing and jewelry.

Exciting graphic displays which chronicle the Peopling Of America from Native Americans to present-day immigrants. More than thirty separate galleries filled with artifacts, historic photos, posters, maps and accompanied by oral histories and immigrant music, all of which tell the moving story of what happened at Ellis Island and to the immigrants that helped settle America. An innovative learning center whose state-of-the-art technology helps teach school children about their immigrant heritage (reservations required).

Statue of Liberty National Monument and Ellis Island Immigration Museum

Liberty Island
New York City, NY 10004
www.ellisland.org

General Information

Telephone: (212) 363 –3200 or (212) 363-3201
or visit their informative website at www.nps.gov/stli
For boat schedules and prices call: (212) 269-5755

Hours

Ellis Island is open daily year-round from 9:30am to 5:00pm, with extended hours during summer. It is closed December 25.

Entrance Fee

There is no admission charge to Ellis Island.

Transportation

Access to both islands is by the **Circle Line Statue of Liberty Ferry**, which leaves from Battery Park in Lower Manhattan and from Liberty State Park in New Jersey. The cost for the ferry is \$7 round-trip for adults (\$5 for seniors and \$3 for children age 3 -17). The ferry runs every 45 minutes daily from 9:15am to 3:30pm. Call (212) 269-5755 for more information about the ferry. The good news is that once you pay the ferry fare, you can visit both Liberty Island.

Ellis Island Links

Ellis Island Recipes

<http://www.ellislandcookbook.com/>

Ellis Island Photographs

http://cmp1.ucr.edu/exhibitions/immigration_id2.html

National Park Service

www.nps.gov/stli

Ellis Island Immigration Museum

www.ellisland.org/