

# The American Place Theatre

# Literature to Life

A Workshop Based on the Book

*Down These Mean Streets*

By Piri Thomas

Teacher Resource Guide

Please be advised this document contains explicit language.



***A Teacher Resource Guide***  
**1999**

## Resource Guide Objectives

This Resource Guide is a project of The American Place Theatre. It has been designed for teachers of high school students. Its objective is to introduce drama-in-education strategies and drama-based activities that can be implemented in the classroom by the classroom teacher. It is designed as a pre- and post workshop guide.

The American Place Theatre offers free workshops for teachers in drama-based techniques in the Teacher's Place program. Call the Education Department for details. 212-840-2960, ext. 20.

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## Author's Biography

**Piri Thomas** (author) was born in New York City in 1928. He was the eldest of seven children. He grew up during the depression of the 1930's in Spanish Harlem, experiencing discrimination as a dark-skinned Puerto Rican. Poverty in the Ghetto led him into drugs, youth gangs, and a series of criminal activities. He served six years in prison for armed robbery, and while in prison, Mr. Thomas began his life of rehabilitation, vowing to use his street and prison experience to turn youths away from lives of crime. He became a street worker in Spanish Harlem working with street gangs. Subsequently, he went to Puerto Rico where he became an assistant to Dr. Efred Ramirez, director of the hospital of psychiatry in Rio Piedras, Puerto Rico. Mr. Thomas, an ex-addict, developed a program for the rehabilitation of addicts through ex-addicts. He has lectured in colleges in the New York City area, as well as the University of Chicago, the University of Wisconsin, Dartmouth, Bard College, Virginia State Teachers College, Northeastern University, University of Illinois and many others. His work in Spanish Harlem was the subject of the film "Petey and Johnny," in which he both appeared and provided the narration. He is the author of several books including *Savior, Savior, Hold My Hand*, *Stories from El Barrio*, and *Seven Long Times*. He currently lives with his wife and two daughters in Berkeley California, where he is working on a Spanish-language edition of and sequel to *Down These Mean Streets*, and an educational film titled *¡Oye Familia! Piri Thomas in a Dialogue with Society*.

## What is Process Drama?

As the new standards for literacy are being implemented and Albany widens the influence of thematic learning and writing for the New York State Regents' Exams, new ways of approaching teaching and learning are needed.

**Process Drama** is an educational tool in which the teacher constructs a dramatic situation, through the use of drama-based activities, for which the students, often in role, create solutions. Using a pretext, usually a piece of literature or art, as a starting point, the drama progresses through the interaction and problem solving skills of the students. The teachers and leaders are often also in role, playing characters that drive the drama but do not control the action.

Using *Down These Mean Streets*, a popular novel by Piri Thomas, as a pretext, the Process Drama will explore the conflicts that arise through the pursuit of identity.

## *Introductory Discussion*

The following is an excerpt from *Down These Mean Streets*. It is intended to be read by the students before they attend the performance at The American Place Theatre.

Man, Brew, you gotta understand. I want to be wanted - not by them motherf\*\*kers but by me! But I ain't got rid of that f\*\*kin' status that I got brought up on. I don't mean at home alone. I mean like I envied it on the streets, I dug it wherever it meant anything to be better than just a wrong color. I feel like shit. It ain't just that I don't wanna be what I'm supposed to be, it's just that I'm fightin' me and the whole goddamn world at the same time. Jesus, Brew, I don't know if I'm makin' any sense at all, but everybody knows paddies are prejudiced against Negroes - and Negroes want to be prejudiced right back."

"Yeah, but them paddies are nuttin' but f\*\*kin' ignorant."

"Like you and me, eh?" I was trying to keep from getting excited. I didn't want to turn my ace-coon boon against me, but all my life I had wanted to be for real. I had wanted to be proud of feeling just the way I'm supposed to feel." Am I going down wrong with you?" I asked Brew. "You wouldn't want me to bullsh\*t you?"

"What yuh mean 'like you an' me?'" he said.

"You and me," I said. "You hate Gerald's guts because he don't wanna be a spook and you hate whites for the reason known to a whole certain race that you happen to be a part of. And I feel the same because I'm hung up. I still can't help feeling both paddy and negro. The weight feels even on both sides even if both sides wanna feel uneven. Goddamit, I wish I could be like one of those lizards that change colors. When I'd be with Negroes, I'd be a stone Negro, and with paddies, I'd be stone paddy. It ain't like with Gerald. He got used to his choice even before he had made it, so it's all over for him inside. It ain't like that with me. Mine is startin' real an' I'm scared of this hate with one name that's chewing me up. So, dig it, Brew, if I'm talking one way one time and another way another time, it's only 'cause I wanna know, 'cause I ain't been born but this one time. Understand?"

### **Questions for Discussion**

- 1) How is Piri feeling? What do you think makes him feel this way?
- 2) Why does Piri say, "I wish I could be one of those lizards that change colors."
- 3) Piri says "all my life I had wanted to be for real," what does he mean by being real?
- 4) What does "being real" mean to you?
- 5) In what ways is Piri struggling with his identity?
- 6) In what ways do we struggle with identity today?
- 7) What do you imagine are some of the outside influences that cause Piri to struggle with his identity?

### *Role on The Wall*

Use this exercise as a follow up activity to the **Introductory Disussion** above.

#### **Objective:**

- For students to think critically about the influences that an environment has on a person.

#### **Activity:**

- Teacher draws a life-size drawing of a body on a large piece of paper, and explains that the body belongs to Piri.
- She/He asks the students to one by one approach the drawing and write one word on the outside of the body that describes the world that Piri lives in.
- The teacher then reviews the words that represent Piri's world.
- The students are then asked to fill the body with words that describe what Piri is feeling, based on the world that surrounds him.

The students may also draw a picture of themselves and complete the same activity individually.

#### **Discussion:**

- 1) What did we learn about Piri?
- 2) How does our environment affect us?
- 3) In what ways can Piri change his feelings? Is it necessary for him to change his environment to change what he is feeling?

### *Inside and Out Poem*

#### **Objective:**

- To bring awareness to how people and things are often different on the outside then the inside.
- To write poetry.

## Activity

- Present a kiwi (or any fruit that looks different on the inside than the outside) and pass it around the class.
- Encourage the students to look at, smell, and carefully touch the exterior of the fruit.
- Have the students write detailed descriptions of the outside of the kiwi.
- Slice the kiwi in half, observe, and write about the inside, as you have the outside.
- Have the students read aloud their descriptions, they will find that they have created a poem.
- Have the students write another poem in this style in which they are the subject.

## Discussion:

1. What similarities and differences have you discovered about your interior and exterior?
2. What can we assess, based on this exercise, about the judgements we make about others?

## *Tableaux (Frozen Picture, Still Image)*

### Objective:

- To physicalize their interpretations of a piece of literature.

### Activity:

- Split the class into two groups. Explain that they will be creating a *Tableaux* – a frozen picture which captures a moment where the participants stay frozen, as if in a photograph.
- Ask students to read the passage from *Down These Mean Streets* below.
- Explain to the students that they will be creating two different still pictures. One will create an image of Piri's world at night and the other group will create the image of day. Ask the students to consider the different characters that exist in this excerpt and what activities they may be doing. The *tableaux* can be abstract or realistic.
- Each group shares their image with the rest of the class and discusses what they see.

In the daytime Harlem looks kinda dirty and the people a little drab and down. But at night, man, it's a swinging place, especially Spanish Harlem. The lights transform everything into life and movement and blend the different colors into a magic cover-all that makes the drabness and garbage, wailing kids and tired people invisible. Shoes and clothes that by day look beat and worn out, at night take on a reflected splendor that the blazing multicolored lights burn on them. Everyone seems to develop a sense of urgent rhythm and you get the impression that you have to walk with a sense of timing.

The daytime pain fades alongside the feeling of belonging and just being in swing with all the humming kicks going on around you. I'd stand on a corner and close my eyes and look at everything through my nose. I'd sniff deep and see the *cuchifritos* and hot dogs, stale sweat and dried urine, I'd smell the worn-out mothers with six or seven kids, and the nonpatient fathers beating the hell out of them. My nose would get a high-pitch tingling from the gritty wailing and bouncing red light of a squad car passing the scene like a bat out of Harlem, going to cool some trouble, or maybe cause some.

**Extension Activity:**

- When groups present their tableaux, instruct the audience to create the sounds that would be contained in the image. (Example: cars honking, babies crying....)
- The audience should perform these sounds while the image comes to life silently in action.

**Discussion:**

1. What new discoveries about Piri's world did you make by participating in the tableaux?

*Writing*

**Objective:**

- To explore further the theme of identity.
- To identify and understand one's own feelings connected to their own identity.
- To become more comfortable with creative writing, and writing a monologue.

**Activity:**

- Write on the Board "I am the way I am because..."
- Instruct the students to complete this sentence and to continue writing on this subject for approximately five minutes.
- Have the students read their monologues to a partner.
- Ask for willing volunteers to share their monologues.

### **Extension Activity**

Repeat the monologue exercise and instruct the students this time to write as if they are Piri completing the phrase “I am the way I am because...”

### **Discussion:**

1. Were there any surprises about yourself you discovered while writing your monologue? What were some of them?
2. What has been most influential to you in creating your identity?

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## *Drama-in-Education Resources*

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