

## The Acting Company

**Margot Harley**  
Producing Director

**Richard Corley**  
Associate Producing Director

# *O Pioneers!*

Adapted by **Darrah Cloud**  
From the Novel by  
**Willa Cather**

Music composed by Kim D. Sherman

The Acting Company 2001 production Directed by Richard Corley

Teacher Resource Guide  
by **Paul Michael Fontana**

## Welcome

### To The Teacher:

Since its founding in 1972, **The Acting Company** has taken great pride in performing classic plays for student audiences.

This **Teacher Resource Guide** has been designed to help you uncover elements of *O Pioneers!* that you want to teach. It is our hope that you will take the exercises and shape them to your needs and the needs of your students. Many of them employ drama-based activities that can be adapted to other material. If you have any questions about the activities in this guide or need other resources, please call the Education Department at **The Acting Company: 212-944-5517** or e-mail us at [mail@TheActingCompany.org](mailto:mail@TheActingCompany.org).

Enjoy!

Paul Michael Fontana  
Director of Education

This **Teacher Resource Guide** for *O Pioneers!* has four parts:

Section One, **Getting Started**, has lesson plans for starting to explore *O Pioneers!* with your students.

The second part focuses on viewing *O Pioneers!*, and is entitled **The Play: Things to Look For**.

Section Three of the Guide is about **The Author: Willa Cather**. You will find an outline of her life and career and information about the era in which she lived.

The fourth part focuses on **The Theater** and the people who create it.

## Getting Started

- **Overall Objective:** The students will have an introduction to the world of Willa Cather's novel, *O Pioneers!* and the play based upon it by Darrah Cloud.

### Brainstorm from the Title: Cather's Novel

#### Objective:

- The students will explore the plot of Cather's *O Pioneers!*

**It is strongly suggested that students read at least some of *O Pioneers!* before seeing the performance if possible.**

**Facts:** Cather's novel *O Pioneers!* was written in 1913, adapted from two earlier unpublished short stories of hers entitled "The White Mulberry Tree" and "Alexandra."

**Exercise:** Have the students brainstorm a list of the types of characters, situations, emotions, themes, locations, and images they think might be included in a play called *O Pioneers!*. Write the list on newsprint. Post it before seeing *O Pioneers!*.

**Discussion: Judging a Book by its Cover**

**Objective:**

- The students will discuss their expectations of *O Pioneers!* from looking at the words and images on the cover of the novel (or the poster art for the play).
- The students will discuss the choices made by publishers and executives to put the images and words on the cover.

**Exercise:** Bring in several different editions of the novel *O Pioneers!*. Ask the students to look at the covers.

Ask them to share with the class images on the covers. What function do those images have? Note too the colors on the cover. What do the colors mean and why were they chosen? Do these images help sell this edition?

What words did the publishers choose to put on the cover? In what font is the title of the novel? What other words or phrases are on the cover? Do these words and phrases help sell this edition? Are you more likely to buy a book or magazine based on images or words? Are there images and words on the back cover?

Why did Cather choose this title? Share with the class the titles of the two short stories that served as the core of *O Pioneers!* Did she feel the title would help sell copied of the novel?

**Post Performance follow up:** Ask the students to create a poster or book cover for *O Pioneers!*. They can cut images out of magazines and newspapers or draw them. What words will they include and why?

**Synopsis:**

*O Pioneers!* tells the story of Alexandra Bergson, the daughter of a Swedish pioneering family, and her efforts to farm the prairie lands of south central Nebraska.

In the prologue to the play, the voices of immigrants express the hope and hardship of life on the Nebraska prairie. As the story begins, Alexandra Bergson's father is dying. He calls her and two of her brothers, Lou and Oscar, to him to announce his wish that Alexandra will take over the management of the family farm upon his death. Their father makes them promise never to give up the homestead. The brothers resent the fact that their father has left Alexandra in control of the land. As the years pass, they also object to her insistence upon sending their younger brother Emil to school. Emil was a young boy when his father died.

For what she perceives to be the good of the family, Alexandra puts aside her affection for her childhood friend and neighbor, Carl Linstrum. Carl's father worked the homestead next to the Bergsons, but during a severe drought became defeated by the land and moved his family back to the East. After conferring with Ivar, an old Norwegian immigrant who sees visions and keeps many old country customs, Alexandra begins to plant potatoes and is able to keep the farm in spite of the drought. When Lou and Oscar want the family to leave their homestead and move to Chicago, she makes a realization about how the rich landowners manage their farms and convinces the brothers to buy more property. She believes that by holding on to the land as it increases in value, the family can become financially secure.

16 years pass. The family is now prosperous. Ivar is living on the Bergson's property, having lost his land. Emil is home from school. Lou is married to the materialistic Annie Lee. Carl returns from New York City on his way to look for gold in Alaska. Alexandra convinces him to stay at her farm for an extended visit. Frank and Marie Shabata are a young Czech couple who have purchased Carl's family's farm next to the Bergsons. Frank is discontented with his life and there is growing attraction between childhood friends Emil and the free-spirited Marie. Lou and Oscar confront Alexandra about her relationship with Carl, who they feel is trying to get Alexandra's land. As Act One ends, both Emil and Carl decide to leave Alexandra and the prairie.

Act Two opens with a visit by Alexandra and Annie Lee's mother, Mrs. Lee, to Marie. Alexandra brings letters from Emil in Mexico City. As winter melts into spring, Emil returns and confronts Marie with his feelings for her. He decides to leave for good, to study law, over the objections of his close friend, the Frenchman Amédée. When the young Amédée dies suddenly, Emil's emotions drive him into the arms of Marie. The tragic outcome of their love brings the play to its conclusion. As the play ends, Alexandra realizes that the land is eternal and that she is part of the land.

**Exercise:** Relate the plot synopsis above to your students. Discuss the title of *O Pioneers!* in relation to its story. Discuss the brainstormed list. Were any of the items on the list included in the synopsis? After seeing *O Pioneers!*, check how many items from the list were in the play.

**Art, it seems to me, should simplify. That, indeed, is very nearly the whole of the higher artistic process; finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole.**

Willa Cather

**Mapping: Nebraska****Objectives**

- The students will examine a map of the Midwestern United States
- The students will explore choices made by an author

**Exercise:** Is Hanover, Nebraska a real place or a fictional one? How about Lincoln, Nebraska? New York City? Help the students to locate these cities on a modern map of United States. Point out Red Cloud, Nebraska, where Cather grew up. Cather was very familiar with life in the

prairies of Nebraska. Through the descriptions in the novel, she paints a vivid picture of the place where the story takes place? Other stories by Willa Cather are set in New Mexico, Pittsburgh, Quebec, and New York City, places that she lived as an adult.

Brainstorm with the students, from the synopsis above, if Cather could have set the story in another location. Could this story be set in rural China? How about the outback of Australia? Could it be set in a city?

### **Characters in O Pioneers!**

#### **Objective**

- The students will be familiar with the characters in the play.
- The students will make assumptions about characters based on their names.

**Exercise:** Reproduce the following page for the class.

Approaching it as if we have never heard anything about these characters, discuss what each of the names makes us feel about them. What consonants are featured in their names? What vowels? Ask the students to play with ways of saying the names. Is it helpful to know the national heritage of each character?

**The history of every country begins in the heart of a man and a woman... And now the old story has begun to write itself over again. Isn't it queer; there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this county, that have been singing the same five notes over and over for thousands of years.**

*Willa Cather; O Pioneers!*

### **The Characters in *O Pioneers!***

Alexandra Bergson, of Swedish heritage

Oscar Bergson, brother to Alexandra, of Swedish heritage

Lou Bergson, brother to Alexandra, of Swedish heritage

Emil Bergson, brother to Alexandra, of Swedish heritage

Father of the Bergson family, of Swedish heritage

Mother of the Bergson family, of Swedish heritage

Ivar, neighbor to the Bergsons, of Norwegian heritage

Carl Linstrum, neighbor to the Bergsons, of German heritage

Marie Shabata, neighbor to the Bergsons, childhood friend to Emil

Frank Shabata, neighbor to the Bergsons, of Bohemian (Czech) heritage

Annie Lee, wife to Lou Bergson, of Swedish heritage

Milly, Lou and Annie Lee's daughter

Old Mrs. Lee, Annie Lee's mother, of Swedish heritage

A Preacher, of Swedish heritage

Amédée Chevalier, neighbor to the Bergsons, of French heritage

Angelique Chevalier, his wife

Marcel, a French immigrant

Father Duchesne, a French Catholic priest

A Catholic Bishop

Townspeople, Immigrants, Pioneers

# The Play: Things to Look For

- **Overall Objective:** The students will learn a variety of ways to analyze texts in a novel and in a play and find specific things to look for in **The Acting Company's** production of *O Pioneers!*.

## Theme of the Play

### **Objective:**

- The students will look for an underlying theme in *O Pioneers!*
- The students will discuss themes in literature

**Exercise:** A careful study of some individual lines from the play may spark a discussion of some themes that might occur in *O Pioneers!*. The following lines from the play may be presented to the class before attending the performance.

As a writing assignment, you may ask each student to choose a line from the list and compose a short essay in response to it.

### Selected Quotes from *O Pioneers!* by Darrah Cloud

1. The earth will give them back to us.
2. The wild roses have bloomed.
3. All night they yell... I cannot think with all the yelling.
4. He was so happy then. And now he's so... unhappy.
5. Don't let on that we can't make it here.
6. The right thing is usually just what everybody won't do.
7. They despise me because I don't look like them. I have visions.
8. Don't worry about my brothers, I'll take care of them.
9. I've been away engraving other people's pictures and you've stayed home and made your own.
10. Lou and Oscar would be better off if they'd stayed poor.
11. I'd rather have had your freedom than my land.
12. There's nothing here.
13. In eleven long years I have made not one solid mark on this land. Only mistakes.
14. I just love what you've done with the house, Alexandra! So many fancy things!
15. Aw, don't go, man! Stay here and get old with us!

As the students see The Acting Company's production of *O Pioneers!*, ask them to find the deeper meaning in the play. What are some of the themes that the students see in the play? Can a piece of art or literature have different meanings to different observers?

You may wish to go back to the selected lines above and review them with the class after seeing the performance. They also may help you assess the student memory of seeing the play.

### **Key to quotes:**

1. Ivar, 2. Alexandra, 3. Frank, 4. Marie, 5. Lou to Alexandra, 6. Alexandra, 7. Ivar, 8. Alexandra to Ivar, 9. Carl to Alexandra, 10. Alexandra, 11. Alexandra to Carl, 12. Immigrants, 13. Father, 14. Annie Lee, 15. Amédée

**Some memories are realities, and are better than anything that can ever happen to one again.**

Willa Cather

## **Bare Feet**

### **Objective:**

- The students will look for characters with bare feet in The Acting Company's production of *O Pioneers!*

- The students will determine why bare feet were used in the play and what they symbolize.
- The students will understand that different audience members may have different interpretations of the same symbol.

**Exercise:** Before seeing the performance, tell the students that one of the artistic choices in *O Pioneers!*, is to have some characters walk in bare feet. Some characters change from wearing shoes to having no shoes. As they watch the performance, ask them to think about what the bare feet might mean.

After seeing the show, ask who had bare feet. Ivar always did. What does that say about him? When did Alexandra, her father, Old Mrs. Lee, Emil, and Marie have their shoes off? In a class discussion, come up with some symbolic meanings for the bare feet in the play. Remind the students that varied interpretations of each component of the performance are encouraged. No viewer's interpretation is wrong, if that is what he or she felt in seeing it. The same is true in all performance, visual art and literature.

### **Soundscape: The Prairie in Winter**

#### **Objective:**

- The students will examine a passage from *O Pioneers!*
- The students will create a soundscape illustrating the passage

**Exercise:** Act Two of *O Pioneers!* opens with a song about the Winter. The lyrics provides a mood for the play. Assign each of the three stanzas to a small group of students and ask them to create a "soundscape" of their stanza. Using sound only, they will convey the mood and meaning of the line. After a few minutes, read the passage aloud as they present the soundscape under it.

### **Roll Over Me Snow**

Roll over me, snow.  
Bury me deep and I'll go to sleep  
Wake me when it's time to grow, oh  
Roll over me, snow

Roll over me, snow.  
Keep me inside where my heart can hide  
and my sorrow no one will know  
Roll over me, snow.

Roll over me, snow.  
Weigh me down, hold my feet  
To the ground  
So that I can never go, oh  
Roll over me, snow.

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### **Text Analysis: A Drop of Water**

#### **Objective:**

- The students will interpret a passage from *O Pioneers!*
- The students will explore the concept of freedom

**Facts:** One of the most famous passages in the novel *O Pioneers!* concerns Alexandra Bergson and her young brother Emil seeing a wild duck on a lake. In the play, the scene comes in the middle of Act 1. Alexandra reflects freedom and responsibility.

**Exercise:** Have the students, working in pairs, examine and interpret the following passage. What is the tone of the speech? Is it addressed to another character or is it a soliloquy? What is the speaker doing as she speaks? Is the speaker still or in motion? What choices might the actor and director make based on the text?

#### **Alexandra**

Look, Emil, a wild duck. The water is so still it looks like there are two of her. But she doesn't know that. She doesn't know age or change. She is so free that everything fulfills her. She could fly away forever now... But only one of her could go...

Darrah Cloud; *O Pioneers!*

After seeing the play, discuss with the students how Director Richard Corley and actor Erika Rolfrud staged the speech.

**Exercise:** In the speech, Alexandra reflects on the wild duck's freedom. At that point in the story, her childhood friend Carl has announced that his family is leaving the Prairie. Alexandra has made a promise to her dying father that she and her family will never give up their family homestead. Is the passage simply a celebration of the beauty of nature that she can share with her baby brother? Or, in the speech, is she somehow comparing herself to the duck, and longing for freedom?

Ask the students to reflect on their own freedom and responsibility. In a short essay, ask them to describe one responsibility or promise that they have made that is difficult for them to keep.

### **Movement: Lyrics**

#### **Objective:**

- The students will do a close reading of a passage in *O Pioneers!*
- The students will create a movement piece based on lyrics from the play.



**Exercise:** In *O Pioneers!* many of the ideas in the songs are illustrated through movement. Ask the students, in 13 small groups, to create images to go along with one of the numbered lines of the passage from the last song in The Acting Company's production of *O Pioneers!*. Give them two minutes to come up with a set of tableaux (frozen images) to illustrate their quote. When everyone has completed the process, read (or have a volunteer read) the entire piece and have the students show their tableaux as their verse is read.

### **Ending Song**

1. And the Owl flies low in the sky
2. We take the old road home
3. Now that you've come, until I die, I'll never be alone
4. Twelve young horses gallop by
5. The prairie moves in waves
6. Let's go to the house we built and watch the end of day.
7. Why does the sun set slowly?
8. Why does the moon fly past?
9. We'd better do now what we can do
10. These lives we have don't last.
11. I'm not afraid of dying 'cause I know where I will be
12. It won't be my love or my brother but the land that will bury me.
13. It won't be my love or my brother but the land that will bury me.

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### **Descriptions**

#### **Objective:**

- The students will do a close reading of a description from *O Pioneers!*
- The students will create a scene or tableau based on a description
- The students will analyze how the actors use other characters' descriptions in making choices about a character

When the Bergsons drove over the hill, Ivar was sitting in the doorway of his house reading the Norwegian Bible. He was a queerly shaped old men, with a thick, powerful body set on short bow legs. His shaggy white hair, falling in a thick mane about his ruddy cheeks, made him look older than he was. He was barefoot, but he wore a clean shirt of unbleached cotton, open at the neck. He always put on a clean shirt when Sunday morning came around, though he never went to church.

Willa Cather; *O Pioneers!*

“Did you ever hear him howl, Carl? People say sometimes he runs about the country howling at night because he’s afraid the Lord will destroy him...”

Lou looked back, “What would you do, Emil, if you was out on the prairie by yourself and seen him coming?”

“Maybe I could hide in a badger hole.”

Alexandra spoke up, “Some say his mind is cloudy, like. But if you get him on a clear day, you can learn a great deal from him. He understands animals.”

Willa Cather; *O Pioneers!*

“You didn’t hear them, Mistress. They despise me because I don’t look like them. Because I have visions. Back home, where we all come from, there were a lot like me. People let us alone. But here, suddenly everybody forgets. They put us in the asylum.”

Ivar, Darrah Cloud; *O Pioneers!*

**Exercise:** Ask the students to read descriptions of Ivar from the play and the novel *O Pioneers!*. Divide the class into three groups. Assign each group one of the descriptions. Each group will dramatize their description. The dramatization may be in a series of tableaux, a single tableau, a silent scene, or another theatrical form. Allow 20 minutes for the groups to rehearse their dramatization. Provide dictionaries for the groups who may need to look up words. Give a “one minute” warning and ask them to do a “final dress rehearsal” before they have to present the piece to the other groups.

If a description comes from an unreliable speaker, the audience can draw conclusions about the speaker, the person or thing described, and the relationship between them. In *O Pioneers!*, Cather writes from an omniscient point of view. Sometimes authors write from the point of view of a single character, whose understanding of the world is based on their specific experience of emotional state.

Actors in a play must use descriptions by other characters to help create the character they are playing. Jonathan Uffelman, who plays Ivar used these descriptions in making choices about his character. He also took into account that the speakers may be exaggerating, lying, confused, or otherwise wrong about their character.

### **Writing: Journal Entry**

#### **Objective:**

- The students will do a close reading of a passage from *O Pioneers!*
- The students will write, as the character Emil, an entry from his journal

**Exercise:** In *O Pioneers!*, Emil writes letters to Alexandra from Mexico City. Using his description below, ask the students to write, for homework, a short diary entry from Emil’s journal explaining his reactions to and a fuller description of one of the things he sees. Remind them that Emil is in his early twenties, has been to school, and has never been to Mexico before.

Dear Sister, I am sitting in an Italian café beside a German couple in the heart of Mexico City. There is a band playing on every corner and I have been to the bullfights twice now. This morning, as I walked past the cathedral, I met a blind shoeshine boy who could play every song I asked for by dropping the lids of the polish tins on the stone steps of the church. There is a flower here that blooms only at night. I go to the *zocolo* to watch it every evening, then to the cafés to drink until sunrise a kind of liquor made from cactus which is the same color as the

dawn. I am learning to play the guitar...

**Exercise:** You may wish to have students write (or improvise in pairs) a dialogue based on Emil's meeting with the shoeshine boy.

### **Technology**

#### **Objective:**

- The students will be aware of technologies mentioned in the play *O Pioneers!*
- The students will compare 1900's technology to today's innovations
- The students will evaluate the impact of technology on people's lives

**Exercise:** Before seeing the performance, present the class with the following list of technologies of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Divide them into 5 small groups. Assign each group one of the inventions and ask them to discuss and record four things about their item: what people used before it was invented, what function it served for the people in the early 1900's, what it has been replaced with in our, modern society, and whether they feel people's lives were improved by it in the early 1900's and why.

#### **Technologies in *O Pioneers!***

Bathtub

Photography

Thresher

Telephone

Gramophone

### **The Passage of Time**

#### **Objective:**

- The students will create strategies to denote the passage of time in a play
- The students will compare several narrative styles

**Exercise:** In the novel *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather shows a passage of 16 years during which the Bergson farm grows prosperous and Emil and Marie become young adults. Discuss with the students how Cather shows the time passage. How would they represent that time passage in a theater piece? In a film? In a poem? In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, he also shows the passage of sixteen years. He uses an actor, playing "Time," who asks the audience, "Impute it not a crime / To me or my swift passage that I slide / O'er sixteen years...since it is in my pow'r / to overthrow law."

It is sixteen years since John Bergson died. His wife now lies beside him, and the white shaft that marks their graves gleams across the wheat-fields. Could he rise from beneath it, he would not know the country under which he had been asleep.

Willa Cather; *O Pioneers!*

After seeing the performance, ask the students how the passage of time was depicted, and whether they thought it was effective.

# The Author: Willa Cather

- **Overall Objective:** The students will know the facts of the life and career of Willa Cather.

## Willa Cather's Life

### **Objective:**

- The students will learn about Cather's life

**Facts:** In her life and work, Willa Cather was associated with a number of places in North America--New York, Pittsburgh, Quebec, New Mexico, and especially Nebraska --but it was in Virginia that she was born, on December 7, 1873, and where she spent her first decade. She was the first child of Charles and Mary (Boak) Cather. Cather's name was originally Willela (after her father's younger sister who died in childhood), but the family always called her "Willie."

During the Virginia years, her father made his living raising sheep on his father's farm, but after its barn burned in 1883, when Willa was nine, the property was sold and the family relocated to Nebraska, where Charles's parents had established a farm some years earlier. In 1884, her father opened a real estate and loan office in the prairie town of Red Cloud, Nebraska, where Willa was to grow up. Red Cloud was a town of about 2,500 people. Cather's graduating class at Red Cloud High School in 1890 contained three students. In high school, she dreamed of becoming a doctor, a profession few women practiced. Cather was also inspired by the actors and actresses who came to perform at the town's Opera House, a place she adored.

In September of that year, she moved to Lincoln. After a year in its prep school, she entered the University of Nebraska, where she studied Greek and Latin, French and English literature, and a wide array of other subjects, including journalism and chemistry. She also published a number of short stories in the *Hesperian*, the university's literary magazine, of which she became editor in her junior year. She graduated in 1895, and in the following year, after being turned down for a teaching position at the university, she moved to Pittsburgh, where she had obtained a job as editor of a women's magazine, the *Home Monthly*. Cather was 22 when she left home to go east and begin the start of her professional career as a writer.

Cather lived in Pittsburgh for the next ten years. She left the *Home Monthly* when it was sold in 1897 and went to work for the Pittsburgh *Leader*, a newspaper. Toward the end of her time in Pittsburgh, she taught Latin and English at Central High School. During these years she was also contributing play and book reviews, as well as poems and short stories, to a number of journals. Her first book, *April Twilights*, a collection of poems, was published in 1903, and in 1905 appeared *The Troll Garden*, her first book of fiction, containing seven short stories, including "Paul's Case."

In 1906, she accepted an editorial position at *McClure's Magazine* in New York, which--despite frequent travels and extended stays in the Midwest, New England, and Europe--was to remain her home for the rest of her life. Her early years in New York saw the publication of her first novels, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), an interesting study of a troubled architect (a book that is perhaps more intellectually stimulating than it is artistically satisfying), and, in 1913, *O Pioneers!*.

By 1913, she was able to cut back her editorial work to a part-time position. Soon she was able to support herself through magazine publication of her stories and serialization of her novels, through the sales of her books, and in one instance through the sale of movie rights. She was so appalled by the 1925 film (and 1934 remake) of one of her finest novels, *A Lost Lady* (1923), that she forbade any further sale of her work for film adaptation.

Her major novels can be divided into several chronologically based groupings. In the first phase are the books--and subject matter--for which she is probably best known, those that chronicle the lives of Midwestern farmers and immigrants, including *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* (1918). Novels such as *A Lost Lady* and *The Professor's House* (1925) present sensitive souls in the process of being ground down by what Cather increasingly regarded as the crassness of modern life. As a further demonstration of her search for enduring values in the midst of her growing alienation from the modern world, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), perhaps her most admired work, and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), she admiringly portrays early Catholic pioneers and preachers, in New Mexico and Quebec.

Cather was quite close to her family, and even though she was in her mid-to-late fifties when her parents died (her father in 1928, her mother in 1931), she was grief-stricken at their deaths. She also enjoyed a number of close friendships throughout her life with sophisticated men and women who shared her interests in travel and in the arts. She never married; her

longest and most intense relationships were with other women; including Louise Pound, Isabelle McClung and a forty-year relationship with companion Edith Lewis. The men she loved the most were her father and brothers. Cather, in her own unassertive but unyielding way, ignored societal assumptions about a woman's place. She lived (as well as presenting similar characters in the protagonists of such novels as *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*) a strong and independent life, following a career of her own choosing, writing in strict adherence to her own standards and vision, and finding her self-worth in her own achievements.

Despite her continuing success with popular reviewers and the general reading public, Cather's last years were far from serene. In addition to the deaths of loved ones, she suffered from ever worsening health, until her own death in New York on April 24, 1947, from a cerebral hemorrhage.

Willa Cather Homepage

**Exercise:** Each of us knows many stories. In writing her works, Cather created stories based on people she knew or saw or on plots she had heard. Which stories are the students' favorites? Ask them to choose one story that they have read and write a one-page paper telling why it would make a good play or film. In a discussion after the assignment, ask the class to assess what makes a good story and what makes a good performance piece. What elements from their list are in *O Pioneers!*?

**Exercise:** *O Pioneers!* is a play about, among other things, death and family. Have your students write (either for homework or as an in-class assignment) a fictional letter, dated April 25, 1947, from one townspeople of Red Cloud, Nebraska to another. In the letter, the townspeople reflects on Cather's life.

### **Biographically-based Writing**

#### **Objective:**

- The students will reflect on the autobiographical nature of *O Pioneers!*.

**Facts:** Willa Cather's family moved from Virginia to Nebraska in 1883, when she was nine, and lived with her grandparents near Red Cloud. In an interview, she recalled the family's arrival: "As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as we had come to the end of everything."

**Exercise:** In a class discussion, ask the students how authors use incidents, locations, and people from their own lives as subjects for their writing.

**Exercise:** Ask the students to write a short fictionalized description of one adult or one place from their childhood.

### **Research: 1900 – life in Nebraska**

#### **Objective:**

- The students will use technology to uncover information about the Nebraska of *O Pioneers!*.

**Exercise:** Divide the class into three teams. Each team will explore one aspect of life in rural Nebraska around 1900, the time *O Pioneers!* is set. One team will look only at economy, one at immigration, and the last at farming. The teams should focus their research on the myriad Internet sources that deal with the Nebraska's history. The research will be presented in an oral presentation, which must include some visual aids. If there is access to technology in the classroom, this assignment may be used as classwork.

**Behind the Scenes:** Michele Tauber, who plays Old Mrs. Lee in *O Pioneers!*, has been on tour with **The Acting Company** before. She says, "I love the diversity of the audiences across the country. I found it interesting to perform in all different kinds of theatrical spaces. One of the most rewarding parts of touring the country is talking with our audiences and getting to hear from them what in the play affects them, changes them, moves them."

# The Theater

- **Overall Objective:** The students will have a stronger understanding of the art of the Theater.

## **Brainstorm: Creating a Theatrical Production**

### **Objective:**

- The students will identify careers in the theater.
- The students will know the collaborative nature of theater.

**Exercise:** Ask the students to name some of the people who work to put a theatrical production like *O Pioneers!* on stage. Write their answers on the board. As the brainstorm continues, present information about the various professions.

### **Producer or Producing Organization**

The producers raise the money needed to produce the play - the money allows the Creative Team to build its vision of the play. Producers oversee all aspects of the production and make sure that the play sticks to their artistic standards. They often put together the package of Script, Director, Designers, and Cast. **The Acting Company** is a not-for-profit organization, which means that money to produce the plays comes from fund-raising through grants and donations rather than from investors.

### **The Playwright**

A "wright" is a type of artisan who makes things that people can use. A wheelwright makes wheels. A playwright makes plays. Plays are of use to other artists - Actors, Directors, Designers - who use the script to make their own artistic statement. Willa Cather wrote the novel *O Pioneers!*. Darrah Cloud created a new piece of art based on that novel when she wrote the play.

### **The Composer**

In *O Pioneers!*, there is instrumental and vocal music. The music serves the story. The composer works with the playwright to create music to enhance the play by helping to create the mood and to further the plot.

### **The Director**

After reading the playwright's script, the director decides on an overall vision for the production. The director meets with the Creative Team to assemble a unified look for the sets, costumes, lighting, and other elements. The director oversees the actors in rehearsal, often with the help of Assistant Directors and Stage Managers.

### **The Actor**

The Cast is the group of men, women, and children who perform the play. Many people now call all the performers "actors," since this is the professional term that applies to people of both genders. The members of the cast may be seasoned actors or new to the stage. They may have trained at different theater schools that teach acting in various ways. They draw on their own experiences and understanding of life to create believable characters.

Actors usually audition for the parts they play. This means that they had to work on the part and read, sing, or dance for the director and producers before they were given the role. All of the actors had to memorize their lines and attend many rehearsals, including some with costumes and props, before opening night.

### **The Voice and Dialect Coach**

The dialects of the various European communities in *O Pioneers!* are very complex. Often a Voice Coach acts as an advisor to the actors and director on the play. She is an expert on the text, the meanings and nuances of the words, and their pronunciation. She can assist the actors with the verse. She is an expert in the period style of the script and helps the actors approach the text from a unified angle.

### **The Costume Designer**

Costumes in a play must help the actors as they create the characters. The costumes should not restrict the movement of the performers. The costume designer and her staff work within the vision of the director for each character.

### **The Set Designer and Lighting Designer**

The play needs an environment in which to take place. The set can be a literal world, with many props and lots of furniture. It can be a suggestion of reality with minimal actual components. The lights add to the environment of the play and enhance the mood that the other designers, the actors, the playwright, the composer, and the director have created. For The Acting Company productions, the set must be easy to assemble and disassemble and must be portable. The lighting design must be able to be recreated in each venue.

### **The Staff and The Crew**

The theater staff - house manager, ushers, box office people, and others - assist the audience in many ways and support each performance. Backstage the Stage Managers and the running crew run the lighting equipment move the scenery and make sure the technical aspects of the performance are perfect. In the office, Marketing people work to make sure people know about the performances and the Development staff makes sure the producers have money to put on the play.

### **Costumes from the 1900's**

#### **Objective:**

- The students will evaluate the use of period's styles in **The Acting Company's** production of *O Pioneers!*

**Exercise:** After the performance, discuss the costumes in the show with the students. Did the 1900's styles enhance *O Pioneers!*? Which character had the most interesting costume? Who had the best shoes? Did each group of immigrants have a unique clothing style? How did costumes help the audience differentiate between two characters played by the same actor? Could the play have been performed in modern dress? Would that have changed the play?

### **Word Power: "Winter Memories"**

#### **Objectives:**

- The students will do a close reading of a speech from *O Pioneers!*
- The students will evaluate the individual words in the speech
- The students will create a rhythmic version of the speech

**Exercise:** Provide each student with the passage from the novel *O Pioneers!*. Ask 12 students to each take one of the lines. Standing in a circle, closed against the rest of the class, ask them to read their lines in order. They should do it a second time, faster. Now, ask them to choose one word from their line that they feel is most important. It's all right for two people end up with the same word – line 1 and line 6 may both choose "winter." The third read-through should be just the words deemed most important in each line. A fourth time should be the same only faster.

1. Winter has settled down over the Divide again;
2. The season in which Nature recuperates, in which she sleeps between the fruitfulness of autumn and the passion of spring.
3. The birds have gone.
4. The teeming life that goes on down in the long grass is exterminated.
5. The rabbits run shivering from one frozen garden patch to another and are hard put to find frost-bitten cabbage-stalks.
6. At night the coyotes roam the wintry waste, howling for food.



7. The variegated fields are all one color now;
8. the pastures, the stubble, the roads, the sky are the same leaden gray.
9. The ground is frozen so hard that it bruises the foot to walk in the roads or in the ploughed fields.
10. It is like an iron country,
11. And the spirit is oppressed by its rigor and melancholy.
12. One could easily believe that in that dead landscape the germs of life and fruitfulness were extinct forever.

Willa Cather; *O Pioneers!*

Finally, they can do it once, in a line facing the other students. In a discussion following the exercise, both the 12 participants and the other students can talk about the passage and the exercise.

### Casting

#### **Objective:**

- The students will create a cast list for a movie of *O Pioneers!*

**Exercise:** Ask the students, “If you were casting a movie of *O Pioneers!*, what stars would you get to be in it?” Ask each to work independently and cast the three Bergson brothers and their sister, Alexandra. Are there any actual sets of brothers that might be appropriate? Remind them that Marie and Emil have grow up during the play and all of the characters age 16 years as the story unfolds.

### Musicals

#### **Objectives:**

- The students will express their feelings about the songs in *O Pioneers!*

**Exercise:** Musicals are the most popular live theatrical events, other than Shakespeare, in the United States. After seeing **The Acting Company’s** production of *O Pioneers!* ask the class if the songs added to the production. Why did **The Acting Company** choose to use a musical version of this play? Did the songs enhance the drama in the play?

### Types of Theater

#### **Objective:**

- The students will be able to identify different types of theaters.
- The students will weigh the benefits of each type of performance space.

**Discussion:** In which types of theaters have the students seen plays, concerts, or other live performances? In what type of theater was **The Acting Company’s** production of *O Pioneers!* performed? What might be the benefits of each type of performance space? What might be the drawbacks of each?

### **Facts:**

Three different types of performance space are most common in the theater:

- **The Proscenium Stage** is the most common. The play is performed within a frame. The frame is called a proscenium arch; the audience looks through this frame as if the performance was a picture.
- **The Thrust Stage** extends into the audience. Spectators sit on three sides.
- **Theater-in-the-Round** has the audience sitting all around the stage. The action takes place on a platform in the center of the room. Another name for a Theater-in-the-Round is an Arena Stage because it is similar to a sports arena.



# Theater Etiquette

## Objective:

- The students will know standard rules of behavior in the theater.

Note: This exercise is intended to be used **before** seeing *O Pioneers!*.

To make the theater-going experience more enjoyable for everyone, a code of behavior has been established. When attending theatrical performances, remember these simple rules of conduct.

- ❖ Be on time for the performance.
- ❖ Eat and drink only in the theater lobby.
- ❖ Turn off all cellular phones and pagers.
- ❖ Talk before and after the performance or during the intermissions only. Remember that the people near you and on stage can hear you.
- ❖ Appropriate responses to the performances, such as laughing and applauding, are appreciated.
- ❖ Act with maturity during romantic scenes.
- ❖ Keep your feet off chairs around you.
- ❖ Personal hygiene (e.g., combing hair, applying make-up, etc.) should be attended to in the restrooms.
- ❖ Once you are seated and the play has begun, stay in your seat. If you see empty seats ahead of you, ask the usher during the intermission if you can move to them.
- ❖ Never leave before the curtain call. After the final curtain, relax and take your time leaving.
- ❖ Open your eyes, ears, and mind to the entire theatrical experience!

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Schroeter, James, ed. Willa Cather and Her Critics. Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press: Ithica, 1967.

Spolin, Viola. Theatre Games for the Classroom. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1986.

Cather, Willa. O Pioneers!. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995.

Woodress, James. Willa Cather Her Life and Art. New York: Pegasus, 1970.

## **For the complete text of the Novel *O Pioneers!* on the Web:**

<http://metalab.unc.edu/pub/docs/books/gutenberg/etext92/opion10.txt>

online text provided by Project Gutenberg.

Other cool online Cather resources:

<http://fp.image.dk/fpemarxind/>

Willa Cather Home Page <http://lcg.harvard.edu/~cather>

or

<http://icg.fas.harvard.edu/~cather/>

## **The Cast of *O Pioneers!***

Annie Lee, Angelique Chevalier	<b>Beth Bartley</b>
Immigrant, Father Duchesne	<b>Corey Behnke</b>
Father, Amédée Chevalier	<b>Todd Cerveris</b>
Marcel	<b>Elliot Dash</b>
Immigrant, Bishop	<b>Joe Domencic</b>
Frank Shabata	<b>Michael Thomas Holmes</b>
Oscar Bergson	<b>Matt Hoverman</b>
Marie Shabata	<b>Grace Hsu</b>
Carl Linstrum	<b>Gregory Jackson</b>
Lou Bergson	<b>Royden Mills</b>
Emil Bergson	<b>Evan Robertson</b>
Alexandra Bergson	<b>Erika Rolfsrud</b>
Mother, Milly, Old Mrs. Lee	<b>Michele Tauber</b>
Ivar	<b>Jonathan Uffelman</b>

# About The Acting Company

The Acting Company, America's only nationally-touring classical repertory theater, was founded in 1972 by current Producing Director Margot Harley and the late John Houseman with a unique mission:

- By touring smaller cities, towns and rural communities of America, the Company reaches thousands of people who have few opportunities to experience live professional theater.
- By presenting superior productions of classic and contemporary plays, the Company builds a discerning national audience for theater, helping preserve and extend our cultural heritage.
- By providing continuing opportunities for gifted and highly-trained young actors to practice their craft in a rich repertoire for diverse audiences, the Company nurtures the growth and development of generations of theater artists.
- By commissioning and premiering important new works by America's foremost playwrights, the Company fosters a theater tradition in which storytelling, language and the presence of the actor are primary.
- By making the language of the theater accessible in performance, special classes and other educational outreach activities, the Company inspires students of all ages and helps them excel in every field of study.

The Acting Company has been fulfilling this singular mission since it was formed out of the first graduating class of the Juilliard School's Drama Division in 1972. Since then, it has traveled over 500,000 miles through 48 states and nine other countries, performing a repertoire of 77 plays for more than 2 million people. Every year, The Acting Company engages an ensemble of the best-trained, most talented young actors available to perform classic plays and contemporary works in repertory. This enables the actors to gain invaluable experience and develop their craft.

A roster of the Company's 263 acting alumni reads like a "Who's Who" of American theater. Lisa Banes, Frances Conroy, Keith David, Gerald Gutierrez, Harriet Harris, James Houghton, Kevin Kline, Patti LuPone, Jesse L. Martin, Mary Lou Rosato, Derek Smith, David Ogden Stiers and Jeffrey Wright stand among America's leading actors and directors whose work in theater, film and television offers proof of the value and versatility of the repertory tradition.

From its inception, The Acting Company has offered innovative educational programs. Doing so makes our performances more accessible to young people, illuminates the core curriculum and helps build the audience of the future. We work with presenting organizations and local schools throughout the year to design and implement the most effective education and outreach efforts in the communities we visit.

In recognition of its consistent level of excellence, The Acting Company has won several Obie Awards, Audelco Awards, the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award and two Tony Award® nominations. The Company's long-standing commitment to multi-culturalism is reflected in the diversity of its repertory, ensemble, staff, and audiences.

## Appendix

### Selected Works of Willa Cather

#### Novels:

- Alexander's Bridge (1912)
- O Pioneers! (1913)
- The Song of the Lark (1915)
- My Antonia (1918)
- One of Ours (1921)
- A Lost Lady (1923)
- The Professor's House (1925)

My Mortal Enemy (1926)  
Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927)  
Shadows on the Rock (1931)  
Lucy Gayheart (1935)  
Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940)

**Short Stories:**

The Troll Garden (1905)  
Youth and the Bright Medusa (1920)  
Obscure Destinies (1932)

**Verse:**

April Twilights (1903)

**Essays:**

Not Under Forty (1936)

**Awards and Honors :**

Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and letters  
1922 Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*  
Doctor of Literature Degrees from the Universities of Nebraska, Michigan, California, Columbia,  
Princeton and Yale.

# Pioneers! O Pioneers!

from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*

1

COME, my tan-faced children,  
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready;  
Have you your pistols? have you your sharp  
edged axes?  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

2

For we cannot tarry here,  
We must march my darlings, we must bear the  
brunt of danger,  
We, the youthful sinewy races, all the rest on us  
depend,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

3

O you youths, western youths,  
So impatient, full of action, full of manly pride and  
friendship,  
Plain I see you, western youths, see you tramping  
with the foremost,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

4

Have the elder races halted?  
Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied,  
over there beyond the seas?  
We take up the task eternal, and the burden, and  
the lesson,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

5

All the past we leave behind;  
We debouch upon a newer, mightier world, varied  
world,  
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of  
labor and the march,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

6

We detachments steady throwing,  
Down the edges, through the passes, up the  
mountains steep,  
Conquering, holding, daring, venturing, as we go,  
the unknown ways,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

7

We primeval forests felling,  
We the rivers stemming, vexing we, and piercing  
deep the mines within;  
We the surface broad surveying, we the virgin soil  
upheaving,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

8

Colorado men are we,  
From the peaks gigantic, from the great sierras  
and the high plateaus,  
From the mine and from the gully, from the  
hunting trail we come,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

9

From Nebraska, from Arkansas,  
Central inland race are we, from Missouri, with  
the continental blood intervein'd;  
All the hands of comrades clasping, all the  
Southern, all the Northern,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

10

resistless, restless race!  
beloved race in all! O my breast aches with  
tender love for all!  
I mourn and yet exult--I am rapt with love for all,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

11

Raise the mighty mother mistress,  
Waving high the delicate mistress, over all the  
starry mistress,  
(bend your heads all,)  
Raise the fang'd and warlike mistress, stern,  
impassive, weapon'd mistress,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

12

See, my children, resolute children,  
By those swarms upon our rear, we must never  
yield or falter,  
Ages back in ghostly millions, frowning there  
behind us urging,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

13

On and on, the compact ranks,  
With accessions ever waiting, with the places of  
the dead quickly fill'd,  
Through the battle, through defeat, moving yet  
and never stopping,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

14

To die advancing on!  
Are there some of us to droop and die? has the  
hour come?  
Then upon the march we fittest die, soon and  
sure the gap is fill'd,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

15

All the pulses of the world,  
Falling in, they beat for us, with the western  
movement beat;  
Holding single or together, steady moving, to the  
front, all for us,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

16

Life's involv'd and varied pageants,  
All the forms and shows, all the workmen at their  
work,  
All the seamen and the landsmen, all the masters  
with their slaves,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!



17  
All the hapless silent lovers,  
All the prisoners in the prisons, all the righteous  
and the wicked,  
All the joyous, all the sorrowing, all the living, all  
the dying,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

18  
I too with my soul and body,  
We, a curious trio, picking, wandering on our way,  
Through these shores, amid the shadows, with  
the apparitions pressing,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

19  
Lo! the darting bowling orb!  
Lo! the brother orbs around! all the clustering  
suns and planets,  
All the dazzling days, all the mystic nights with  
dreams,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

20  
These are of us, they are with us,  
All for primal needed work, while the followers  
there in embryo wait behind,  
We to-day's procession heading, we the route for  
travel clearing,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

21  
you daughters of the west!  
you young and elder daughters! O you mothers  
and you wives!  
Never must you be divided, in our ranks you  
move united,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

22

Minstrels latent on the prairies!  
(Shrouded bards of other lands! you may sleep--  
you have done your work;)  
Soon I hear you coming warbling, soon you rise  
and tramp amid us,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

23  
Not for delectations sweet;  
Not the cushion and the slipper, not the peaceful  
and the studious;  
Not the riches safe and palling, not for us the  
tame enjoyment,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

24  
Do the feasters gluttonous feast?  
Do the corpulent sleepers sleep? have they lock'd  
and bolted doors?  
Still be ours the diet hard, and the blanket on the  
ground,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

25  
Has the night descended?  
Was the road of late so toilsome? did we stop  
discouraged, nodding on our way  
Yet a passing hour I yield you, in your tracks to  
pause oblivious,  
Pioneers! O pioneers!

26  
Till with sound of trumpet,  
Far, far off the day-break call--hark! how loud and  
clear I hear it wind;  
Swift! to the head of the army!--swift! spring to  
your places,  
Pioneers! O pioneers.

# Timeline of the life of Willa Cather

- 1873 **Willella Cather** was born on 7 December 1873 in Back Creek Valley, Virginia. She was the eldest child of Charles Cather and Mary Virginia Boak Cather. The first Cathers originally came from Ireland to Pennsylvania in the 1750's.
- 1883 The Cather family join Willa's grandparents William and Caroline and her Uncle George in Webster County, Nebraska. The party includes Willa's two brothers, a sister Jessica, and her grandmother Rachel Boak (who lived with them).
- 1884 They move to Red Cloud, a railroad town nearby, where Charles opens a loan and insurance office. They never get very rich or influential, in Willa's opinion because he places intellectual and spiritual matters over the commercial. Her mother is a vain woman, mostly concerned with fashion and trying to turn Willa into "a lady." Here Willa meets the girl Annie Sadilek whom she later uses for the Antonia character in *My Antonia*.
- 1890 Willa graduates from Red Cloud High School. Afterwards she moves to Lincoln in order to study for the entrance at the University of Nebraska.
- 1892 Publishes her short story "Peter" in a Boston magazine. It later becomes part of *My Antonia*.
- 1895 Graduates and returns home to her family in Red Cloud.
- 1896 Publishes *On the Divide*. She moves to Pittsburgh in order to edit the "Home Monthly" and also to make reviews for the "Pittsburgh Leader".
- 1901 Teaches English and Latin in Pittsburgh high schools.
- 1902 Visit to Europe.
- 1903 *April Twilights* (poems) published.
- 1905 Short story collection *The Troll Garden*.
- 1906 Moves to New York to work for McClure's Magazine, which she later becomes the managing editor of. She begins a forty-year relationship with her companion, Edith Lewis.
- 1908 Meets Sarah Orne Jewett, local colorist from Maine, who later inspired Willa to write about Nebraska.
- 1911 Writes *The Bohemian Girl* and begins to write *Alexandra*, which later becomes part of *O Pioneers!*
- 1912 *Alexander's Bridge* published. For the first time, Cather visits the Southwest, where she "discovers herself". The place made her think of Nebraska and its mixture of native and immigrant cultures. On her way home she visits her old Bohemian friends in Nebraska.
- 1913 Publishes *O Pioneers!*
- 1915 Visits Mesa Verde in Colorado. Publishes *The Song of the Lark*.
- 1915 Cather visits the Southwest, Wyoming and Nebraska and meets her old friend Annie Sadilek Pavelka again.
- 1917 Writes *My Antonia* in New Hampshire and publishes the book the following year.
- 1920 Short story collection *Youth and the Bright Medusa*.
- 1923 Awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours* published the year before. *A Lost Lady* published.
- 1925 *The Professor's House*.
- 1926 *My Mortal Enemy*.
- 1927 *Death comes for the Archbishop*.
- 1930 Awarded the Howells medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for *Death comes for the Archbishop*.
- 1931 *Shadows on the Rock*.
- 1932 Collection of 3 short stories: *Obscure Destinies*, whereof the story "Neighbour Rosicky" is based on the Pavelka family.
- 1933 Awarded Prix Femina Americain for *Shadows on the Rock*.
- 1935 *Lucy Gayheart*.
- 1936 Essay collection *Not under Forty*.
- 1938 *Sapphira and the slave Girl*.
- 1945 *The Best Years*.
- 1947 Willa Cather dies 24 April and was buried in New Hampshire.
- 1972 Edith Lewis dies and is buried beside Cather in New Hampshire.