TRIANGLE: REMEMBERING THE FIRE

A FILM BY DAPHNE PINKERSON

EDUCATORS’ SUPPLEMENT

TRIBECA YOUTH SCREENING SERIES
THEMES

Triangle: Remembering the Fire transports the viewer a hundred years back in time, to a city teeming with newly arrived immigrants and expanding due to the influence of industrialization. Immigrants often worked long hours without breaks in unsafe working environments. Since child labor laws were not in place at the time, children also toiled for long hours in factories, often in unsafe working conditions. In 1911, the fire that broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, killing 146 workers—mostly immigrant women and girls—changed the course of history, paving the way for government to represent working people, not just business, for the first time, and helped an emerging American middle class to live the American Dream.

The film explores the following themes, which were drawn from the NYC Scope and Sequence for High School Social Studies & English Language Arts:

Civic Ideas and Practices
Culture
Individuals, Groups and Institutions
Individual Development and Identity

WHY WE PICKED THIS MOVIE

Film is a powerful medium that can inform, entertain, educate and serve as a catalyst for social change. Tribeca Youth Screening Series showcases the exciting work being produced in the independent film community. Films such as Triangle: Remembering the Fire have been chosen for their educational relevance, but also for their cinematic merits, and provide students with access to documentary films, filmmakers, and subject matter not typically explored in mainstream Hollywood fare. In the process, they are introduced to new places and new ideas, and experience innovative approaches in storytelling that highlight and reinforce the skills and themes they are studying in their English Language Arts and Social Studies classes.

PREPARING YOUR CLASS

Preparing students to be critical viewers is different than simply having them watch a film. Critical viewing is about being able to examine the information that a film is giving you and ask meaningful questions about the information that you receive. One key step is having students read and complete the activities in the Study Guide (which they will receive at the screening). The following pre-screening activities will help your students engage with the film as critical viewers and prepare them to be active participants at the screening event and in the classroom work you do surrounding the film.
PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In preparation for viewing this film, you can have your students discuss some of the following questions:

• What do you know about New York City history in the 1900s? What was daily life like in the city at the turn of the century? What would the daily life of a newly arrived immigrant have been like?
• What are some of the reasons that forced immigrants at the time to leave their countries for America?
• What is the American Dream? What does this term mean to you? What do you think it meant to the immigrants who were arriving to New York during that time?
• Where did most immigrants move to when they first arrived in New York? What were living conditions like at the time?
• If you were an immigrant from the 1900s, where do you think you would find work in New York? What were working conditions like for immigrants at the time?
• What do you know about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911? What impact did the fire have on the future of worker’s rights and safety conditions in factories? What tactics have workers used and continue to use in order to demand fair wages and safe working conditions in the workplace?
• What is a documentary film? How does it differ from a narrative film? If a film is a documentary, does that mean that it is depicting the “truth”?

RESEARCH IN ADVANCE

Goal: To help your students prepare to view Triangle: Remembering the Fire by having them research and review key terms and film vocabulary.
Time: 30–60 minutes

KEY TERMS
Immigrant
American Dream
Cheap Labor
Child Labor
Garment Factory
Sweatshop
Industrialization
Strike
Collective Bargaining
Unfair Wages
Working Conditions
Worker’s Rights
Labor Union

FILM VOCABULARY
Documentary film
Director
Editing
Re-enactment
Point-of-view
Archival footage
PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITIES

THE IMMIGRANT’S EXPERIENCE

Goal: Students will write a creative essay describing the living and working conditions of a newly arrived immigrant to New York during the 1900s.

You will need: Computers and Internet access, Pens, loose-leaf paper or journals

Time: One class period/45–60 minutes

Outline:

• Explain to students that they each must research the living and working conditions of newly arrived immigrants in New York at the turn of the 20th Century. Students can also research and read about the different countries these immigrants came from and their reasons for migrating to the U.S.

• Once students have thoroughly researched their subject, explain to your students that they each will be writing a first-person account of what life was like for immigrants during the early 1900s. Students can write up to a two-page response.

• Encourage your students to come up with a character and to give their character a name and a back-story. Here are some questions you can consider asking your class in order to get students thinking critically:

  1. Where does your character come from? How old are they?
  2. What are some of the reasons that forced your character to start a new life in America?
  3. Where does your character move to when they arrive in New York? Where do they work?
  4. What does the world of your character look like, sound like, smell like?
  5. What kinds of hardships does your character face on a daily basis?

• After students have written their first-person accounts, each student will then present their account to the rest of the class.

AMERICAN DREAM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Goal: Students will re-examine the American Dream, what it means to them and to their family. Students will have the opportunity to conduct an interview with a family member or friend and write an oral history about the meaning of the ideal.

You will need: Pens, loose-leaf paper or journals

Time: One class period/45–60 minutes

Outline:

• Explain to your students that they will be collecting an oral history on the meaning of the American Dream. Prior to the oral history, consider conducting a classroom discussion in which you and your students will address the following:

  1. How was the ideal of the American Dream born?
  2. What does the American Dream mean to your students? What did it mean to newly arrived immigrant families in New York in the 1900s?
  3. Has the meaning of the American Dream shifted over the decades? If so, how?
  4. Does the ideal still exist today?

• Each students should choose a specific individual, be they a friend, family member, or teacher whose oral history they will record either during the class or outside of class.

• Make sure to explain to your students that although the American Dream has been associated with immigrants, the ideals of equality, freedom, and prosperity that it holds can pertain to any individual.

• Prior to the interview, students should write down a list of questions that they would like to ask the person they will be interviewing. Some sample questions your students may want to consider include:

  1. What does the American Dream mean to you?
  2. Is the ideal it represents something that you are striving to achieve in your life?
  3. How does an individual go about achieving the American Dream?
  4. Does the American Dream mean something different for you versus what it might mean for your family and friends?

• Once each student has recorded their oral history, they can then share them with the rest of the class either during the same period or during the following class for those students choosing to conduct interviews outside of school.
WORKER’S RIGHTS

**Goal:** Students will examine the different tactics that workers have used in order to ensure safe working conditions, fair wages and working hours, as well as compensation. Students will also work in groups to come up with possible solutions or modes of action that would alleviate such conditions for young immigrants in the 1900s by forcing their employers to act.

**Time:** One class period/45–60 minutes

MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

**You will need:** Computers with Internet access, Pens, loose-leaf paper or journals

OUTLINE

• Taking into consideration the poor working conditions and low wages of the immigrant women, men, and children working in New York City factories during the 1900s, conditions which for some workers still persist, conduct a class discussion about the different tactics workers have used in order to protest such conditions. The following list includes different forms of protest which you can discuss with your students:

1. A **strike** or **work stoppage** is the refusal of employees to go back to work. For further reference, students can read about the 1909 *Uprising of the 20,000* which included workers from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.
2. A **work slowdown** is a form of protest in which workers reduce their output effort in order to communicate their grievances and demand change.
3. **Picketing** is a form of protest in which people gather outside a workplace or specific location, often holding signs, in an attempt to dissuade others from entering while also drawing public attention to a cause.

• Urge your class in order to expand this list by coming up with other modes of protest that workers can use in order to get their message across and enact change. Suggestions may include a letter writing campaign, a social media campaign, etc.

• Once your students have finished brainstorming, divide the class into small groups of 3–4 students. Advise each group that they must come up with an action plan for communicating the grievances of garment factory workers such as the women who worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Each group must carefully consider what actions they would take in order to get an employer to act by improving working conditions. Students should use the preceding classroom discussion as a jumping off point in order to formulate a strong plan of action.

• When each group has written or typed up their plan of action, they can then present their ideas to the rest of the class.
POST-SCREENING LESSON PLANS

A CALL TO ACTION

Goal: Students will write an essay examining the issues that are most important to them.
Time: 60–90 minutes

MATERIALS AND RESOURCES

You will need: Computers with Internet access, pens, loose-leaf paper or journals

OUTLINE

• The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire spurred many labor and women’s rights activists into action. Taking into consideration the issues surrounding the fire, including the fight against unfair labor practices, the fight for fair wages and safe working environments, as well as the rights of immigrants and child laborers, urge your students to think about the present day social and economic issues directly impacting their lives.
• Lead a classroom discussion in which students can share some of the issues and causes they are passionate about or directly involved in. Make a note of all the issues that are raised on the blackboard, creating a master list for the class.
• After the discussion, direct each student to write an essay in which they will discuss the cause or issue they are dedicated to. Students should think about the following questions:
  1. How does this cause/issue impact you personally? How does it impact the world?
  2. When did you get involved in the cause?
  3. What kind of action have you taken to support the cause/issue?
• Once students have finished writing their essays, have each share what they wrote with the class.
LETTER TO A TRIANGLE WORKER

Goal: Students will address a personal letter to a Triangle worker in which they can pose questions about living and working conditions during the 1900s, while also sharing what life is like for teenagers living in New York City today.

You will need: Pens, loose-leaf paper or journals

Time: One class period/45–60 minutes

- Explain to your students that they will each write a letter to a young Triangle Shirtwaist Factory worker. Remind your class that during the early 1900s, child labor laws were not strictly enforced until the Great Depression, and that among the workers who toiled in garment factories were also young children.
- Ask your students to come up with a list of questions they would like to ask their counterparts. Here are some sample questions for them to consider:
  1. How old are you? Where do you live? What is life like in New York City?
  2. Why do you need to work?
  3. How long have you worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory?
  4. What are the working conditions in the factory like?
- Students should also come up with a list of facts they would like to share about what life is like for them in New York, a hundred years into the future. Urge your students to think about child labor and the hardships that their peers would have faced a hundred years ago.
- Students can use their journals or a sheet of loose leaf to write their letter.
- Once each student has written their letter, have each student share what they wrote with the rest of the class.
- You may want to consider sending the letters to the Remembering the Fire Coalition as a way of honoring the young workers of the factory.

TOUR OF 1900S NEW YORK

Goal: Travel back in time to a city teeming with newly arrived immigrants as you take your students on a guided historical walking tour of the lower east side.

You will need: To schedule a tour

Time: 60–90 minutes

The Lower East Side History Project, a non-profit organization that relies on a community of historians, educators, artists, activists and preservationists, is dedicated to promoting awareness and appreciation of the history, culture and community of the lower east side.

Schedule a school tour of the lower east side with the organization or invite a speaker to come and speak to your students about the history of the neighborhood. The organizations offers the Women Movers & Shakers Walking Tour, a special tour, covering 15 blocks, that concludes at the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

For more information, you can visit www.leshp.org.