

The House of the Spirits / La Casa de los Espiritus
by Caridad Svich
Education Pack

THEMES:

FEMALE EMPOWERMENT
SOCIO-ECONOMIC CLASS
POLITICS & CORRUPTION

GENRE: Adaptation, drama, magical realism

AGE RESTRICTION: 16+ (violence, sexual violence including rape, and sexual content)

NUMBER OF CHARACTERS: 11 (7F, 6M)

CHARACTER LIST:

ALBA (live and mediated), witness to history (on stage throughout)

CLARA, her grandmother, a seer

ROSA THE BEAUTIFUL, her aunt (live and mediated); also plays **BLANCA**, her mother [actor in her 20s]

ESTEBAN TRUEBA, her grandfather, the patriarch

ESTEBAN GARCIA, Esteban Trueba's bastard son, a colonel (live and mediated)

Chorus (women of the city, women of the country):

PANCHA, peasant girl; also plays **WOMAN 1**

NIVEA, Alba's great-grandmother; also plays **WOMAN 2**

FERULA, Esteban Trueba's sister; also plays **COUNT OF SATIGNY**, Blanca's suitor, a dandy, and **WOMAN 3**

TRANSITO SOTO, a prostitute

SEVERO, her great-grandfather; also plays **PEDRO GARCIA**, foreman of the Three Marias ranch, and **FATHER ANTONIO**, a priest, and **MAN ONE**

PEDRO TERCERO, Alba's father, field hand, revolutionary, singer; also plays **GUARD**, and **BARABBAS**, Clara's dog (a puppet)

SYNOPSIS:

Based on the novel by Isabel Allende, Caridad Svich's play charts the rise and fall of the Trueba family from the perspective of its women in an unnamed Latin American country. The play spans the 1920s to the 1970s as the country moves through enormous socio-political changes that culminates in a devastating dictatorship. The play charts the conflicted rags to riches rise of stubborn patriarch Esteban Trueba, which is contrasted with the interior and exterior worlds of the grandmother Clara, the mother, Rosa the Beautiful, and the daughter, Alba, as they navigate their lives in the shadow of gender and state violence.

Told from the sensorial point of view of the youngest of the three generations of women, the play opens with Alba in a government torture room. The swirling memories, frightening and amusing, lyrical and fantastic, illuminate the stage as Alba records her family's history and ultimately finds the strength to recover her own story.

The play was written in both Spanish and English versions.

KEY MOMENTS:

Act 1, Scene 15 (5F, 3M)

Clara speaks for the first time since the death of her sister Rosa. She is 18 and, having foreseen that she will marry her sister's ex-fiancé Esteban Trueba (she is a clairvoyant), proposes to him on a rare visit to the town. He accepts. Suitable for a duologue.

Act 3 Scene 27 (3F, 1M)

Blanca confesses to her father that she is carrying the child of Pedro Tercero, with whom she is in love (that child is, of course, Alba). Esteban Trueba responds with a physical assault on his daughter, also striking his wife when she attempts to intervene. Suitable for several characters.

Act 4 Scene 34 (3F, 1M)

The chorus describes the political coup and the subsequent violence of the military state. The president is killed and a new government is instated. It transpires that anyone who criticizes the new government or speaks out in protest is imprisoned or killed.

STEP ONE: ASK

Refer to Act 1 Scene 15 (described in the 'Key Scenes' section above) and compare it with Act 5 Scene 33, where Alba recounts her mother's story. After being forced by her father to marry the Count, Blanca's path crosses Pedro Tercero's once again. With Pedro Tercero's life on the line, Blanca leaves her family behind to escape the country with her lover.

What philosophical questions come to the students' minds when they read these scenes? In groups, ask them to come up with questions based on the play, and which have no easy answers. Think about the themes raised and perhaps try to combine more than one concept in one question to broaden it out. Here is an example to get you started:

- Is it still considered taboo for women to lead the direction of a heterosexual relationship, such as being the one to propose marriage, or abandon it? Consider this question across culture and

socio-economic class to explore similarities and differences in expectations around gender roles across the world.

Vote to select one of the questions and discuss it, keeping the fruits of your conversations (themes, further questions, provocations, points of discomfort...etc) alive as you go through the exercises below.

STEP TWO: EXPLORE

Exercise 1:

Song and poetry are prevalent throughout the play. After reading the play, ask students to work in groups to prepare an original song about the story, or about one of the themes. They can set it to a well-known tune and perform it to the class with choreography. Give them permission to have fun!

Exercise 2:

Refer to Act 4, Scene 34 (as described in the 'Key Scenes' section above).

Select four students to speak the lines of the Chorus. They begin by standing tightly knit together, with whoever is speaking the lines changing direction and leading the group, until the next person whose turn it is to speak starts to lead. They must all move perfectly in sync with one another as they speak, like a school of fish.

While speaking with one voice is particularly poignant in reference to a dictatorship that expects all its citizens to tow the government line, the 'School of Fish' exercise (as above) can be applied to the various chorus lines in order to enable students to speak as one voice, as choruses are traditionally expected to do in theatre.

Exercise 3:

In Act 3, Scene 27, Blanca confesses to her father that she is carrying the child of Pedro Tercero, with whom she is in love (that child is, of course,

Alba). Esteban Trueba responds with a physical assault on his daughter, also striking his wife when she attempts to intervene. We then see Esteban Trueba's patriarchal values extend to conservative dogma in Act 4, Scene 34, when he vehemently defends politics that protect the few against the many, in what he sees as a model of economic stability.

Esteban Trueba personifies conservative, patriarchal power, while Blanca, Clara and Alba push back throughout the play.

Step 1: Select the actors who will play out the above two scenes.

Step 2: Ask volunteers from the class to 'sculpt' the actors into an image of what the scene might look like at the peak of Esteban Trueba's power (you will need to collectively identify, with the class, the point of Esteban Trueba's greatest power in the script itself).

Step 3: Ask the students to sculpt the actors into an image where Blanca, Clara and Alba are at the height of pushing back, so that they are least oppressed and perhaps even hold the power over Esteban Trueba. Again, you will need to collectively establish that point in the script first with the class.

Step 4: Once these visual points are established, dynamise the scene into action – ask the actors to enact the scenes, reaching the images sculpted by their classmates at the height of Esteban Trueba's power, and ending with the image capturing the height of Clara, Alba and Blanca's power.

Continue to revisit these scenes until the class is satisfied with the power journey.

STEP THREE: FEEDBACK

Discuss what came up for the students. What are they still wondering about? What was the most interesting thing they learned? What was their least favourite part and why?