



# Everybody's Hero: The Jackie Robinson Story



## Study Guide

A Play with Music by Mad River Theater Works

## About the Show

At the start of the summer of 1947, television was brand new, the sound barrier had not been broken and baseball was a white man's game. By the time the fall arrived, all that had changed. President Truman addressed the nation for the first time on TV, Chuck Yeager flew faster than any man ever had and Jackie Robinson became the first African-American to play major league baseball. It was no accident that Jackie Robinson was chosen as the first ballplayer to break the color barrier in the sport known as America's pastime. There were plenty of good athletes in the Negro Leagues: some maybe even better than Jackie. However, when Branch Rickey decided to add a black person to the Brooklyn Dodgers, he knew that individual had to be special. He had to be strong enough to stand up to the teammates who would ridicule him, the pitchers who would throw at him and the fans who would send him threats. He had to be able to turn the other cheek, to show that he was the bigger man and to prove that he could be everybody's hero. This play with music by Mad River Theater Works shows the events that shaped Jackie Robinson's character, his struggle to gain acceptance and the tremendous obstacles he overcame on his way to changing the face of our nation and our national pastime.

Age Appropriateness: 3rd grade and up

Duration: 1 hour plus question and answer session

Music: contains live music (guitar, bass and percussion)

## Mad River Theater Works

Mad River Theater Works is an acclaimed touring ensemble that creates vibrant and evocative plays with music for families and young audiences based on American history and folklore. Founded in 1978, Mad River presents original productions that explore traditional stories and themes in a unique, innovative style. With over twenty-five years of touring experience, the company has earned an international reputation for authentic presentations that bring little-known characters and aspects of American culture to the stage. The artists of Mad River seek out subjects that reflect the rich diversity of our common heritage and make shows that combine the rhythms and folkways of everyday life with tales about extraordinary individuals. The resulting body of work is a vivid tapestry that weaves together live music, storytelling, and drama, exploring the grit and humanity of characters from the past.

Mad River has toured extensively throughout the United States and Canada, performing at theaters and museums such as the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., the California Center for the Arts, and the Raymond Kravis Center for the Performing Arts. Mad River has also presented multiple performances at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, as well as appearing in major cities including Boston, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and San Francisco, and at international events such as the Vancouver Children's Festival.

The Mad River company members are a multi-talented group of writers, performers, and theater educators with experiences that span the worlds of theater and music, from regional theaters to the London Fringe, from folk festivals to Nashville. Producing Director and Composer Bob Lucas is an accomplished songwriter and performer who has achieved major success for his recordings as well as theater work. Two of his songs are included on the Grammy-winning album by Alison Krauss, *New Favorite*. Working as an ensemble, Mad River has created a unique theatrical style that appeals to audiences of all ages.

## Baseball: A Brief Introduction

Baseball is a bat-and-ball sport played between two teams of nine players each. The goal is to score runs by hitting a thrown ball with a bat and touching a series of four bases arranged at the corners of a ninety-foot square or diamond. Players on one team (the batting team) take turns hitting against the pitcher of the other team (the fielding team), which tries to stop them from scoring runs by getting hitters out in any of several ways. A player on the batting team can stop at any of the bases and later advance via a teammate's hit or other means. The teams switch between batting and fielding whenever the fielding team records three outs. One turn at bat for each team constitutes an inning; nine innings make up a professional game. The team with the most runs at the end of the game wins. In North American, professional Major League Baseball (MLB) teams are divided into the National League (NL) and American League (AL). Each league has three divisions: East, West and Central. Every year, the champion of Major League Baseball is determined by playoffs that culminate in the World Series. Four teams make the playoffs from each league: the three regular season division winners, plus one wild card team.

### Jackie Robinson

Jack Roosevelt "Jackie" Robinson (January 31, 1919—October 24, 1972) was the first African American Major League Baseball player of the modern era. While not the first African-American player in major league history, Robinson broke the baseball color line when he debuted with the Brooklyn Dodgers organization in the mid-1940s. This ended a nearly sixty-year era of segregation in professional baseball, in which African Americans were prohibited from competing in Major League Baseball and its affiliated minor league systems and were instead relegated to the Negro Leagues. Since segregation dominated most aspects of American life at the time, Robinson's baseball career had a major cultural impact beyond sports and was a significant precursor to the subsequent Civil Rights Movement.

Apart from his cultural impact, Robinson had an exceptional baseball career. In ten seasons, he played in six World Series, contributing to a World Championship for the Dodgers in 1955. He was selected for six consecutive All-Star Games from 1949 to 1954, was the recipient of the inaugural MLB Rookie of the Year Award in 1947 and won the National League MVP Award in 1949, the first black player so honored. Robinson was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962. In 1997, Major League Baseball conferred a unique honor upon Robinson by retiring his uniform number 42, his designation across all major league teams. Robinson was also known for his pursuits outside the baseball diamond. He was the first African-American television analyst in Major League Baseball and the first African-American vice-president of a major American corporation. In the 1960s, he helped establish the Freedom National Bank, an African-American owned/controlled entity based in Harlem, New York. In recognition of his achievements on and off the field, Robinson was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal.

He was born into a family of sharecroppers in Cairo, Georgia, during a Spanish flu and smallpox epidemic. He was the youngest of five children, after siblings Edgar, Frank, Matthew ("Mack") and Willa Mae. His middle name was in honor of former President Theodore Roosevelt, who died 25 days before Robinson was born. After Robinson's father left the family in 1920, they moved to Pasadena, California where his mother worked various odd jobs to support the family. Growing up in relative poverty in an otherwise affluent community, Robinson and his minority friends were excluded from many recreational opportunities. Robinson excelled in four major sports through his High School, Junior and College experiences: football, baseball, track and basketball, though baseball was thought of as his "worst" sport. Before graduating from the University of California, Los Angeles, he worked with a government-run youth administration and eventually ended up in

Honolulu to play football for the semi-professional, racially integrated Honolulu Bears. Robinson then returned to California to play as a running back for the Los Angeles Bulldogs of the Pacific Coast Football League. World War II and Robinson's military career ended his nascent football career. The Kansas City Monarchs sent Robinson a written offer to play professional baseball in the Negro Leagues in early 1945 of which he accepted. Although he played well for the Monarchs, Robinson was frustrated with the experience, having been used to the structured playing environment in college. The Negro Leagues were disorganized and had embraced gambling interests, which appalled him. While playing for the Monarchs, Robinson pursued potential major league interest. The Boston Red Sox held a tryout for Robinson and other black players on April 16, 1945. The tryout, however, was a farce chiefly designed to assuage the desegregationist sensibilities of powerful Boston City Councilman Isadore Muchnick. Other teams had more serious interest in signing a black ballplayer.

In the mid-1940s, Branch Rickey, club president and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, began to scout the Negro leagues for a possible addition to the Dodgers' roster. Rickey selected Robinson from a list of promising African-American players and interviewed Robinson for a possible assignment to Brooklyn's International League farm club, Montreal Royals. Rickey was especially interested in making sure his eventual signee could withstand the inevitable racial abuse that would be directed at him. In a famous three-hour exchange on August 28, 1945, Rickey asked Robinson if he could face the racial animus without taking the bait and reacting angrily—a concern given Robinson's prior arguments with law enforcement officials in Junior College and the military. Robinson was aghast: "Are you looking for a Negro who is afraid to fight back?" Rickey replied that he needed a Negro player "with guts enough not to fight back." Robinson agreed to turn the other cheek to racial antagonism and Rickey signed him to a contract for the 1946 season. When he started playing for the Royals, Robinson and the team had to fight several hurdles with regards to racism in Florida both in training and hosting games. Eventually, the team was allowed to host a game involving Robinson at Daytona Beach. Robinson was called up to the major leagues by the Dodgers in 1947, six days before the season opened. Robinson's promotion was met with a generally positive, although mixed, reception among the newspapers and white major league players. However, racial tensions existed in the Dodger clubhouse to which the manager stood by Robinson and gave the other players an ultimatum ending in their being traded from the team if they had an issue with it. Robinson played well in spite of the animosity towards him from his team, opposing teams and the league.

## A Note from the Author

One of the most significant challenges of creating a play about Jackie Robinson is how to show the terrible abuse Robinson faced as he became the first African-American to play professional sports in the United States and still remain within the bounds of language and behavior that are acceptable today. We live in an era when public racial slurs are not tolerated and discrimination has been outlawed at the state and federal levels. It is hard to believe the level of prejudice faced by minority groups as recently as the 1950's and 1960's. When Jackie Robinson was entering Major League Baseball in the 1940's, institutional racism was even more entrenched.

We have tried to be sensitive in scenes that depict the name-calling and physical attacks received by Robinson. We have avoided many of the well-documented taunts and insults while still trying to give some sense of the hatred that Robinson faced every day. In one particular case, however, we felt it was important to use a word that Robinson heard repeatedly and hurt him deeply.

One of Robinson's first confrontations with authority was his court martial by the United States Army in 1943. Robinson had joined the military in 1942 at the beginning of World War II. The Army was segregated, but Robinson was accepted to Officer Candidate School and became a Second Lieutenant. He served as a morale officer and worked to improve conditions for African-American soldiers. While stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, Robinson was riding on a civilian bus and was told to move to "colored section" at the rear. He refused and was arrested by the Military Police.

Robinson was within his rights. The Army had recently outlawed segregation on buses serving the military. But during his arrest, Robinson was repeatedly called a "nigger" by the arresting officers and it made him very

angry. The trial transcript shows that the use of this racial slur was an important factor in his acquittal.

“Nigger” is one of the most highly charged and controversial words in the English language. It is normally a word we would never use on stage, however, it is critical to the story. Composer Bob Lucas wrote a powerful song called “Words Are Alive” to show the wounds Jack received by being called this name. It only appears once, but we hope that the context will make it very clear to students that words can be as hurtful and destructive as a slap in the face.

### Pre-Show Discussion

1. Read parts of the study guide to the students or have the students read on their own. Discuss any questions they may have about that aspect of the topic they will see. This will help clear up any confusion they may have before the show.
2. Have the students seen any shows that were based on sports figures, teams or games before? What about movies? How do they expect this show to be different from what they have seen in the past?
3. Have the students draw or write predictions on what they think they will see based on what they read in the study guide, pictures and history. After the show, look at the predictions and see who was correct.
4. This study guide includes just a fraction of information on Jackie Robinson. Have the students research Jackie Robinson as well as other African American players from the time period and write a paper describing what each had to go through. Compare the experiences with the African American players of that time period. How is it different from what African American players have to deal with now?
5. Have the students research baseball in other countries. How is it different or similar to American Baseball? This can be a research paper, project or just a homework assignment.

### Post-Show Discussion

(Some of these are good to discuss with your students while you wait for your bus to arrive at the theatre after the show!)

1. Have each student come up with one or two of their favorite parts of the show. What was their least favorite part?
2. Compare the show they just saw with other theatre shows they've seen or with sporting events they've been to. How are they different? How are they similar?
3. What is the difference between a baseball game and the play they've just seen? Are there similar aspects in each or are they completely different?
4. Do the students think they could write a play based on their lives? Have the students write a story that could be turned into a play. Maybe include their favorite day, vacation they've taken, school or friend adventures. To expand on this activity, have the students write a scene of their play. Go to the library and look at the format of a play including stage directions, dialogue and scene description. Have the students perform their scene for the class. If they can't come up with something on their own lives, have them write something for another historical figure.

5. Write a journal entry about the play. Include favorite or least favorite parts. Are there particular scenes or times in the show that students related to in some way. Have they ever felt like Robinson did, not necessarily with racism but with being different? Were there things they would do differently if they were in his shoes?
  
6. Pretend you are a reporter for a newspaper. Write a review of the play they have just seen.