

Wings of Courage

School Show Study Guide from the Artist

Luther Burbank Center for the Arts
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Mad River
Theater Works

presents

Wings of Courage



Study Guide

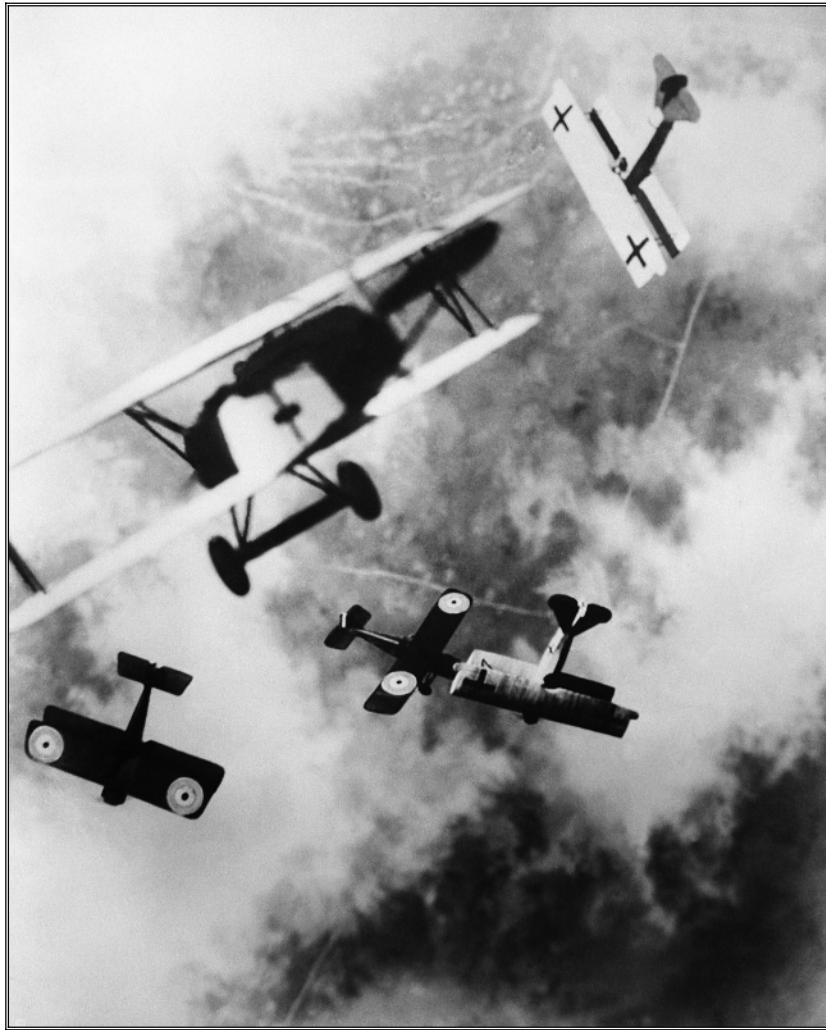
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About the Company

Mad River Theater Works is a professional touring theater company based in West Liberty, Ohio. Our purpose is to craft plays that are both drawn from and produced for the people of the farms and small towns of rural America, and to communicate the concerns and insights of our communities to people everywhere. Since 1978 we have collected stories, molded this material into plays, and performed our work at community centers, schools, colleges, and theaters throughout the United States reaching an annual audience of over 50,000 through over 200 performances.

Mad River Theater Works is one of only a handful of professional theaters in the United States based in rural communities. Our unique mission has attracted the support of the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as foundations, corporations, and individuals.



The Artists

Bob Lucas (Composer, Johnny, Mr. Bradley, Will Irwin, other roles) comes from a singing family tradition. He is a rhythm guitarist, banjo player, old time fiddler and has a rich tenor voice, spanning over three octaves. As a composer and lyricist with Mad River Theater Works, he has collaborated with playwright Jeff Hooper to create *Freedom Bound*, *Black Hats*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *Evelyn and the Polka King* and has acted as musical director and performed in those plays and many others. Bob was music director and performed in *Evelyn and the Polka King* at Actors Theatre of Louisville, Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, and City Theatre in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Moreover, Bob is a songwriter whose words and tunes have been praised by "Melody Maker" and "Pickin" Magazine, and two of his songs appear on Alison Kraus' most recent album. Bob's first album, *The Dancer Inside You*, received a 4-star rating from "Downbeat" Magazine and Bob has recently released a new CD, *Rushsylvania*. Bob's musical expertise encompasses folk, bluegrass, swing, rock, and spiritual music of many genres.

Charles Wesley Lattimore (Eugene Bullard, other roles) received his B.A. degree in theatre performance from Florida A&M University where he was elected by popular demand to be the first King of the University (Mr. FAMU) in its existence. This multi-talented singer, dancer, actor, recording artist has been heard and seen on stages across the country with rave reviews in such shows as *Dreamgirls*, *Five Guys Named Moe*, *Everybody's Her*, *the Jackie Robinson story*, *Piano Lesson*, *Good God Almighty*, *Blues for Alabama Sky*, *One Mo' Time*, *Sophisticated Ladies*, and *The Wiz* to name some. A jack-of-all-trades and master of most, Charles is no stranger to Mad River Theater Works. He has appeared in leading roles since 2006 and is pleased to be considered a core company member and mainstay of the permanent ensemble.

Jeff Hooper (Writer, Director) was the founding director of Mad River Theater Works. Jeff has worked at Actors Theatre of Louisville in Kentucky, Arena Stage in Washington DC, Berkeley Stage Company in Berkeley, California and with Roadside Theater in Whitesburg, Kentucky. He was also a founding director of the Half Moon Theater in London, England. Jeff pioneered techniques of combining storytelling with drama and music to produce lively original works for the stage. Other plays written for Mad River include *John Henry*, *Liberty Line*, *Captive Heart*, *Freedom Bound*, *Black Hats*, *The Return of Kate Shelley*, *Riverboatin'*, and *Coming of Age*. Jeff also collaborated with Native American Poet Lance Henson to create *Cry of the Americas* and *Coyote Road* and directed the premiere of John Olive's *Evelyn and the Polka King* at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1992. The Indiana Repertory Theatre in Indianapolis has produced two of Jeff's plays, *Freedom Bound* and *Captive Heart*. Jeff was awarded an Ohio Arts Council Playwriting Fellowship in 1989-90 and has served on numerous panels for the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ohio Arts Council, and the Florida Arts Commission. Jeff is also a site reporter for the Theater Program of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Synopsis

The play opens on the streets of New York late at night in 1953. The audience meets Eugene (Gene) Bullard, an African-American who is working as a door-to-door perfume salesman. Gene describes this lonely corner of the city as ‘smack dab in the middle of nowhere’ but says he feels right at home anyway. Gene engages the audience in conversation and asks them what they see when they look at him. Is he just someone trying to sell them something or can they look below the surface? Gene shows a display of medals he earned fighting for France in World War I and tells the audience that he was the first African-American to fly an airplane in combat. Gene then asks if that changes how the audience sees him. He says that there is much more to his story and starts to tell how he became a pilot, beginning with his childhood in Columbus, Georgia.

Eugene Bullard’s story begins in 1900. His mother is dead and he lives with his father, who works in a warehouse. The first scene shows Gene learning from Mr. Bradley, his father’s boss, that his father has struck a white man at work and has had to leave town to save his own life. Gene is only eight years old, yet he is all alone in the world. Mr. Bradley asks Gene where he will go and Gene replies that his father has told him that in Paris, France, white and black people all live together in harmony attending the same churches and schools. All are treated with equal respect. Mr. Bradley tells Gene that is just a fairytale, but Gene determines that he is going to find his way to Paris.

After wandering throughout the South for several years, Gene stows away on a steamer and arrives in Liverpool, England. The second scene shows Gene Bullard as a young man. He has gotten a job as a ‘human target’ at an amusement park. Gene puts his head through a hole in a canvas sheet and then people pay pennies to throw balls at him. Gene is quick and his sassy banter draws large crowds. One day, a customer comes along who tricks Gene into letting down his guard by offering Gene a job. Although the customer wasn’t serious, Gene pursues him anyway and learns that his name is Johnny Welsh. He manages boxers at a gym in London including Jack Johnson, the Heavyweight Champion. Gene works hard to convince Johnny to give him a job and Johnny finally agrees.

Gene travels to London and starts training to become a boxer under Johnny’s direction. Johnny tells him that using his head is just as important as his physical training. Gene learns that Johnny grew up on the streets of Chicago and was a poor boy, too. Johnny warns Gene that he must be careful not to take his success for granted. Johnny tells him, ‘One slip of the tongue, one wrong move, and the game’s over.’ Gene wins his first fight and has finally gained the respect he had dreamed of back in Georgia, but he still has his dream of going to France. Gene decides to give up boxing and join a ‘minstrel show’ that will take him to Paris. Gene appears briefly as a character in the minstrel show and then Johnny confronts him. Johnny feels that the minstrel show is degrading and shows a negative stereotype of blacks. Johnny says, “When people see you up there playing the fool, they are going to think that’s the way you really are.” Gene thinks that participating in show is nothing to worry about and leaves London.

A few months later, Gene arrives in Paris. He is momentarily jubilant. World War I begins and changes everything. Gene joins the French Infantry and is sent to the fighting. He is wounded and in the next scene, Gene is in a hospital recovering with bandages and a cane. He is approached by Will Irwin, a reporter for the Saturday Evening Post, who wants to interview him about his war service. Gene won the Croix de Guerre (‘Cross of War’), one of France’s highest honors, for bravery. Irwin notes that he had seen Gene in the minstrel show and doesn’t take the

time to listen to Gene's story. The article Irwin writes about Gene emphasizes the slapstick of the minstrel show and is condescending to Gene.

The article in the Saturday Evening Post upsets Gene. He feels that his bravery is made to sound like an accident. Gene feels that he needs the chance to prove that he deserves respect and won't get another chance because of his war wounds. His old friend Johnny arrives in the hospital. They talk about old times and Gene apologizes to Johnny for joining the minstrel show. Gene says he wants a chance to prove himself again and Johnny suggests that Gene join the French Air Force. Gene is famous because of the article in the Saturday Evening Post so the French Generals agree to take him.

Gene and Johnny are assigned to same Air Force squadron and fly together into battle. Gene and Johnny engage the enemy and Johnny gets into trouble. A German plane is right behind Johnny trying to shoot him down. Gene goes to his rescue, but the single machine gun mounted on his airplane won't work. It appears that Johnny will be lost, but Gene spins around and executes a dangerous move, using the wing of his plane to clip the wing of the German plane. The German plane goes down and, although his plane is severely damaged, Gene survives. Gene lands behind the lines and makes his way back to his Air Force base.

When he meets Johnny back at the base, Gene is very happy to see his friend. But Johnny tells him that the United States is taking over the French Air Force and the American generals won't allow Gene to fly because he is an African-American. Gene says he doesn't care. Gene says he has proved to himself and to the world that he is as good as anyone else through his heroic deeds. Johnny protests, saying it isn't fair, but Gene says that the inner feeling of freedom that he has found is far more important than the approval of the Generals and no one can take that away. And so Gene finds himself back where he started, smack dab in the middle of nowhere, but feeling good about himself and right at home.



Background to the Story

Wings of Courage is based on the true story of Eugene Jacques Bullard, an incredible individual who was a boxer, bandleader, nightclub owner, and war hero as well as the first African-American to fly an airplane in combat during World War I. Bullard is a little known figure, although his achievement predates the accomplishments of the Tuskegee Airmen, the famous African-American flying unit of World War II, by almost twenty years. We first learned about Eugene Bullard from the United States Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio. They have a small display about Bullard on their web page and a few materials about him in their archive. P.J. Carisella and James W. Ryan tell Bullard's story in a 1972 book, The Black Swallow of Death, although unfortunately the book is now out-of-print.

Wings of Courage tells about the first part of Gene's life. Eugene Jacques Bullard was born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1894, the youngest of ten children. His mother died when he was five years old and Gene became an orphan when he was eight after his father got into a fight with a white man at work and had to leave the community in fear for his life. Gene wandered throughout the South for three or four years. He spent time with gypsies and worked various odd jobs. Gene's had heard many stories about Paris, France, from his father. His father had told him that in Paris blacks received much better treatment than America and, as a result, Gene determined to travel to Paris.

Gene stowed away on a steamer and, after he was discovered, worked his way to Liverpool, England. He found work there as a 'human target' in a carnival sideshow. An American boxer whose nickname was 'the Dixie Kid' befriended Gene and soon, Gene became a boxer himself. Gene had 42 fights and traveled throughout Europe, but his dream of living in Paris was unfulfilled. He left boxing to take a part in a minstrel show called 'Freedman's Pickaninnies' and at the conclusion of the tour, settled in Paris.

The year was 1914. Gene was in Paris only a few months when World War I began. Gene joined the French Foreign Legion, an infantry regiment of the French Army, and fought in many of the major battles of the first two years of the war. He was severely wounded at Verdun and received the Croix de Guerre, one of France's highest military honors, for his bravery in battle. His war exploits made him a celebrity. Articles about Gene appeared in many publications including the Saturday Evening Post. No longer able to serve in the infantry, Gene volunteered for the French Air Force and was accepted.

Gene was trained and flew missions for the French Air Force during 1916 and 1917. In November, 1917, the United States took over the air war. All Americans serving in the French Air Force were automatically granted commissions in the American Army except Eugene Bullard. Shortly afterward, Gene was reassigned to the infantry where he performed in support roles until the end of the war in 1918.

There is no official explanation about why Bullard was denied a commission and dismissed from the Air Force. In his journal, Bullard attributes his treatment to a confrontation with a French officer while off-duty. His biographers say that there are documented instances in which he was found to be absent without leave, a serious infraction of military discipline. In any case, Bullard seems to have served admirably and deserves far more recognition than he has previously received.

The events of the play end with Bullard's service in the Air Force and dismissal from service. After the war, however, he remained in Paris where he was a band leader, nightclub owner, and a

central figure in the extensive literary and musical scene which included Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, among many others. Gene reenlisted in the military at the outbreak of World War II and was again severely wounded. This time, however, Gene was sent back to the United States to recover. He remained in the United States after the war earning his living selling perfume door to door and as an elevator operator at Rockefeller Center in New York. Eugene Bullard died in 1959.

The events of the play are closely based on Eugene Bullard's actual experiences. The primary liberty taken in *Wings of Courage* is in the creation of Johnny Welsh, the boxing manager and friend, who is a fictional character. We have condensed friendships with other individuals into a single character to try to give the audience the sense of how Gene's adventuresome spirit and outgoing personality helped and, on occasion, hurt him as tried to gain the respect he felt he deserved. The account of the aerial battle in which Gene saves Johnny is also fictional, but is based on accounts of actual battles in which Gene did participate. The most difficult part of creating any play is finding the keys to the personality of the main character. Eugene Bullard was clearly a proud and determined man who was willing to take great chances to achieve his goals. We hope that *Wings of Courage* honors his memory as an authentic hero as well as a fascinating person.

Minstrel Shows

One of the crucial developments in *Wings of Courage* comes when Eugene Bullard decides to quit his boxing career and join a minstrel show. Minstrel shows were popular forms of entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both in the United States and Europe. They were variety shows with a combination of comedy, dancing, and singing. They featured white or black performers in “blackface” makeup in which a black color is applied to the face and hands and white circles are drawn around the eyes and mouth.

The minstrel show was meant to be a representation of African-American culture. Eugene Bullard joined a group called “Freedman’s Pickaninnies” and toured Europe in the winter of 1913-14. In creating *Wings of Courage*, we decided not to use the word “Pickaninnies” because we considered it racially inflammatory but we felt that it was very important to include this part of Gene’s life because we thought it must have had a personal impact. Looking back on the experience near the end of his life, Gene wrote in his journal:

“Our act was singing, dancing, and making people laugh with our slapstick comedy. Audiences thought it was killingly funny to see and hear someone hit with a slapstick. I say “hear” because a smack with one of them makes a loud sound. That is where the name ‘slapstick comedy’ comes from. Well, slapsticks and all, we with Freedman’s Pickaninnies amused audiences all over Europe and even into Russia. Of course, I knew the tour would include Paris, which is why I had joined Freedman’s Pickaninnies. When the troupe left Paris, you may be sure I did not leave with them.”

From our perspective now, Gene’s participation in the minstrel show is degrading. The minstrel show has come to be considered as an extremely negative stereotype of African-American culture and it is difficult for us to imagine that this experience didn’t affect Bullard in some way. He was a person of immense pride and ‘playing the fool’ seems to go against

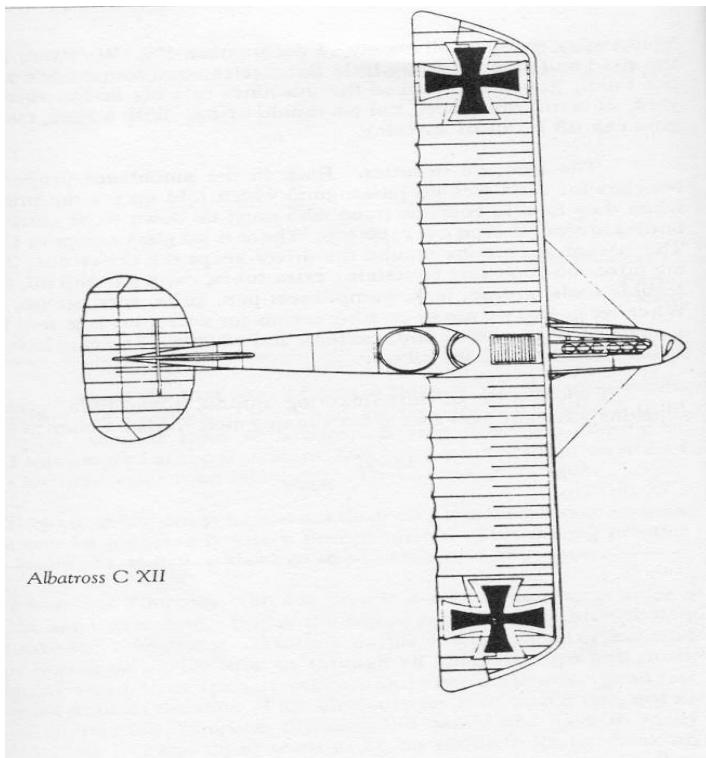
everything he believed in. We don't know if Bullard regretted joining the minstrel show or if there was any connection between his stage appearances and the stereotyped image of him that appeared in the Saturday Evening Post a few years later. However, we made the choice to include and link these events because we felt that it provided important clues to Gene's personality.

Every writer who tackles a new story must make many decisions about what to include and what to omit. Eugene Bullard is a particularly difficult subject because he did so many remarkable things in his life. We developed a particular viewpoint about Eugene Bullard from all of our research and then included the events we thought did the best job of illuminating his character. Our choices are at the heart of the process of creating an interpretive piece of art and are what distinguish a play or a novel from a work of history. We do not claim that our account of the early years of Eugene Bullard's life is completely factual. To even try to do so would have been impossible. However, we have tried to show events that will make people more aware of Gene and his important contribution to history as well as communicate something universal about the nature of freedom, pride, and independence. It is up to you to decide whether or not we have succeeded in our work.

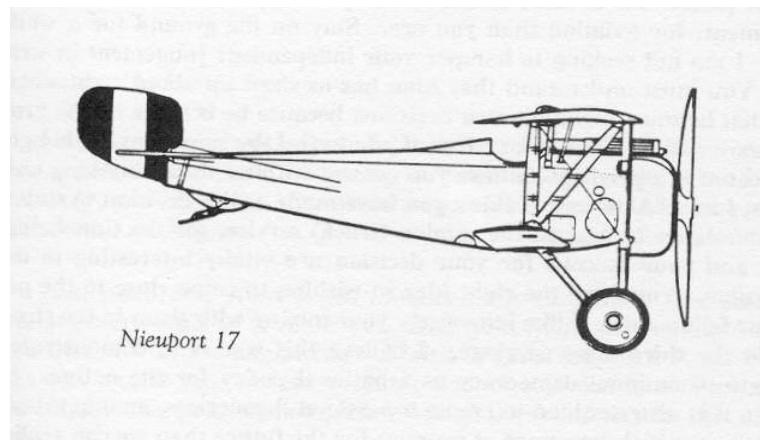


Airplanes of World War I

The climax of the *Wings of Courage* comes when Eugene Bullard becomes a pilot for the French Air Corps. This was in the era of bi-planes (airplanes with two wings) made primarily of wood and canvas. The airplane Gene flew, the Spad VII, was typical of the era. It was very small: only 25 feet from the tip of one wing to the other, 20 feet long, and 7 feet tall. It was also very light, weighing just over 1100 pounds, considerably less than a modern compact car. Pilots in open cockpits (and without parachutes!) took these planes as high as 17,000 feet. It took unusual courage to join the air corps.



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Vocabulary

The following are words that are used in the play. In context, their intent should be readily understandable to almost all children, however, it might be useful for children to be familiar with these words.

essential	wail
barge	sideshow
remorse	comprehend
ember	whine
privilege	strut
cologne	mire
creed	reverie
confetti	tri-plane
pulverized	proclamation
victor	

The following are phrases and slang words that are used in the play. As above, their intent should be understandable.

<u>word or phrase</u>	<u>meaning</u>
“black face”	make up worn by white people impersonating African-Americans
“juke joint jive”	music heard in a bar
“smack dab in the middle”	right in the middle
“not worth a plug nickel”	not worth anything
“colored, Negro”	antiquated terms for an African-American
“shilling, guinea”	English units of money
“stickball”	early form of baseball played by kids on the street
“stowed away”	hid
“snookered”	fooled by a trick
“a lot of brass”	very aggressive
“swells”	rich people
“Consul”	Ambassador
“Jim Crow”	negative stereotype of an African-American
“Vickers”	airplane machine gun
“Kaiser”	ruler of Germany in early 1900’s