

teacher resource guide

# schooltime performance series



*just*  
*mercy*

arts  
education  
**njpac**





Jamie Foxx playing Walter McMillian (left) and Michael B. Jordan laying Bryan Stevenson (right) in *Just Mercy*

## about the performance

Starring Newark's very own Michael B. Jordan (*Black Panther*, *Creed*, *Creed II*), and Oscar winners Jamie Foxx (*Ray*, *Baby Driver*, *Django: Unchained*) and Brie Larson (*Room*, *The Glass Castle*, *Captain Marvel*), *Just Mercy* is an inspiring drama that brings one of the most important stories of our time to the big screen. Award-winning filmmaker Destin Daniel Cretton (*The Glass Castle*, *Short Term 12*) directed the film from a screenplay he co-wrote, based on the award-winning nonfiction bestseller by Bryan Stevenson. A powerful and thought-provoking true story, *Just Mercy* follows young lawyer Bryan Stevenson (Jordan) and his history-making battle for justice.

After graduating from Harvard, Stevenson heads to Alabama to defend those wrongly condemned or those not afforded proper representation. One of his first cases is that of Walter McMillian, who is sentenced to die in 1987 for the murder of an 18-year-old girl, despite evidence proving his innocence. In the years that follow, Stevenson encounters racism and legal and political maneuverings as he tirelessly fights for McMillian's life.

## njpac on the mic podcast

with Donna Walker-Kuhne



Walter McMillian (left) celebrates with family after Bryan Stevenson won his release from death row in 1993

### About NJPAC On the Mic

NJPAC On the Mic is an audio resource that takes SchoolTime performances to the next level. This podcast series features three exclusive, curriculum-aligned episodes for all of NJPAC's 2022-2023 SchoolTime performances. On the Mic offers students the opportunity to engage their listening skills, deepen their understanding of the performance and learn about the process of bringing a live or recorded production to life. This immersive audio experience features a theme song by students in the NJPAC arts education program.

### How to listen to this episode of NJPAC On the Mic

Scan the QR code above or visit: [njpac.org/education-program](https://njpac.org/education-program) to access the podcast and the following show notes:

**Part 1: About** | *Pre-show audio, 6 minutes*

**Includes:** An introduction to the performance, artists & venue, welcome message

**Written and hosted by** Dania Ramos

**Sound editing and design by** Michael Aquino

**Theme and outro music by** Slim Beats from NJPAC's Hip Hop Arts and Culture Program

**Additional music from** Epidemic Sound

**Voiceover by** Michael Aquino

**Welcome message voiced by** Donna Walker-Kuhne

**Part 2: Connect** | *Post-show audio, 10 minutes*

**Includes:** Reflection questions, a look at artists who contributed to the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and Memorial for Peace and Justice, a brief selection of vocabulary words

**Written and hosted by** Dania Ramos

**Sound editing and design by** Michael Aquino

**Theme and outro music by** Slim Beats from NJPAC's Hip Hop Arts and Culture Program

**Additional music from** Epidemic Sound

**Opening question voiced by** Donna Walker-Kuhne

**Part 3: Spotlight** | *Post-show audio, 17 minutes*

**Includes:** An exclusive interview with Donna Walker-Kuhne, discussion starters

**Written and hosted by** Dania Ramos

**Sound editing and design by** Michael Aquino

**Theme and outro music by** Slim Beats from NJPAC's Hip Hop Arts and Culture Program

**Additional music from** Epidemic Sound

# inspired ideas in the classroom

P

Prepare for the performance

Share statistics from the following resources with your students. Think about which statistics may be most impactful to your students.

- **Facts about the Death Penalty**
- **Criminal Justice Reform**
- **Race and Wrongful Convictions in the United States 2022**

Lead a discussion about the unethical nature of the statistics you shared. Pose the question, “What can we/you do about this?” Transition to introducing Bryan Stevenson, the Equal Justice Initiative and *Just Mercy* by showing the **trailer** for the film and Stevenson’s **introduction**.

Consider the magnitude of the statistics shared by your teacher. Imagine how you might feel if your friend of family member were among those counted in the statistic. As a student, what can you do about the broken incarceration system?

Watch the trailer for the movie *Just Mercy*, based on the book of the same name by Bryan Stevenson, and watch Stevenson’s introduction that provides insight to his efforts for fixing our broken justice system.

NJ Student Learning Standards

**Social Studies**  
**6.1.8.CivicsDP.3.a**  
**SEL**  
**Recognize and identify**  
**Demonstrate an awareness**

E

Experience the performance

Introduce and define the term empathy. As they view the film, ask students to consider which characters demonstrate empathy, and which do not. Remind students that the movie is based on a true story, the bulk of which spans the years of 1986 (Ronda Morrison’s murder) to 1993 (Walter McMillian’s release from prison).

Reflect on the meaning of the term empathy. Which characters in the movie demonstrate empathy and which do not? How do you imagine you would react if placed in their scenarios? Remember, *Just Mercy* is based on a true story and took place not even 40 years ago.

**SEL**  
**Recognize and identify**  
**Demonstrate an awareness**

R

Reflect, respond and read

Throughout the movie, there are allusions to the history of racism in the United States. Recall the scene when Walter McMillian sees a group of Black inmates working in a field (a clear connection to slavery), and when Johnny D. states, “This is just another excuse to lynch a Black man” in reference to his unjust incarceration. **This video** may be helpful for students to understand our country’s history.

The Equal Justice Initiative hosts “**History of Racial Injustice Daily Calendar**,” detailing 365 acts of racial injustice in United States history. Introduce the resource using **this video**, and find the post for today’s date and share it with students. Lead a discussion comparing the daily entry and the movie.

Use the current day’s event to complete **Activity Sheet 1** as a class. Then provide students with a copy and allow them time to choose a date/event and work independently.

While *Just Mercy* spans the years 1986-1993, it is important to remember that the United States has a long and brutal history of racial injustice. There are important connections between the events portrayed in *Just Mercy* and the foundation of racism in our country.

Using the “History of Racial Injustice Daily Calendar” as a guide, complete **Activity Sheet 1** together with your class. Afterwards, fill out the activity again independently by choosing your own date/event.

**English Language Arts**  
**RH.9-10.3.**  
**SEL**  
**Recognize and identify**  
**Demonstrate an awareness**

F

Focus

As a class, take a look at the cases page on the Innocence Project’s **website**. Choose a case to highlight for the class. Discuss notable similarities in Johnny D.’s case in *Just Mercy* and the influences of racial injustice in the United States when applicable. Then, allow students time to explore the site independently. Ask students to look for a case that evokes a similar feeling to how Bryan Stevenson felt upon discovering Johnny D.’s case.

Review the case files on the Innocence Project’s **website** with your teacher. Consider what connections you can make between the cases on the website and Johnny D.’s from *Just Mercy*. Do you notice the influence of racial injustice in the history of the United States? How many more inmates in our country do you think have also been falsely accused and deserve to be exonerated?

Spend time searching the site independently until you find a case that provokes an emotional response like Bryan Stevenson when he found Johnny D.’s case.

**English Language Arts**  
**RH.9-10.3.**  
**Social Studies**  
**6.1.8.CivicsDP.3.a**  
**SEL**  
**Recognize and identify**  
**Demonstrate an awareness**

O

Originate

As a class, rewatch **the scene** from *Just Mercy* where Bryan Stevenson presents his closing argument in Johnny D.’s case. The text for this scene can be found in **the script**.

Discuss the tone used by Stevenson, the content and the overall persuasive manner of his speech. Ask students to imagine themselves in the position of either Stevenson or a lawyer with the Equal Justice Initiative/the Innocence Project. Their task is to write and present a closing statement for the case they chose on the Innocence Project’s website.

Distribute **Activity Sheet 2** and monitor students’ progress as they brainstorm and write their argument.

Rewatch Bryan Stevenson’s closing argument scene from *Just Mercy* and consider his tone of voice and the content he used. Can you imagine yourself in his shoes? Or the shoes of a lawyer for the Equal Justice Initiative/the Innocence Project?

Your task is to write a closing argument for the case you chose on the Innocence Project’s case site. Your goal is to achieve exoneration (or complete release) of your client. Use **Activity Sheet 2** to brainstorm and write your closing argument.

**English Language Arts**  
**NJSLSA.SL3.**  
**NJSLSA.W1.**  
**NJSLSA.W7.**  
**Career Readiness, Life Literacies, & Key Skills**  
**9.4.12.IML.7**  
**Social Studies**  
**6.3.8.CivicsPR.5**  
**6.3.8.CivicsHR.1**  
**SEL**  
**Recognize and identify**  
**Demonstrate an awareness**

R

Rehearse

Ask students to find a partner and present the first draft of their closing arguments. The student who is listening should do so from the viewpoint of a judge or jury member — someone who will decide the fate of the case. By receiving feedback from their partner, students can revise as needed in preparation for their “court case” (final performance).

Pick a partner and present the first draft of your closing argument. They will listen from the viewpoint of a judge or jury member, and then you will do the same when they present. If you were the judge or jury, would you free your partner’s client? Exchange feedback and make any revisions in preparation for your “court case” (final performance).

**English Language Arts**  
**NJSLSA.SL4.**  
**NJSLSA.W1.**  
**NJSLSA.W5.**  
**Career Readiness, Life Literacies, & Key Skills**  
**9.4.12.IML.7**  
**Social Studies**  
**6.3.8.CivicsPR.5**  
**6.3.8.CivicsHR.1**  
**SEL**  
**Utilize positive communication**

M

Make magic

Arrange your classroom to resemble a courtroom. Each student will perform as a lawyer presenting their closing argument with the goal of exonerating their client.

One option may be to invite other teachers or school administration to function as the judge or jury members during the presentation. A helpful assessment tool may be a rubric that results in not only a numeric grade, but also a sentence of exoneration or continued incarceration.

Channel your inner Bryan Stevenson and present your argument to exonerate your client. Consider your body language, the tone of your voice and your overall demeanor while presenting. Recall Stevenson’s lines at the conclusion of the film as he and Walter McMillan spoke at the U.S. Senate Committee Hearing, “We can’t change the world with only ideas in our minds. We also need conviction in our hearts.” Let this guide your final performance and your longing for justice, mercy and grace as you learn and grow.

**English Language Arts**  
**NJSLSA.SL4.**  
**Social Studies**  
**6.3.8.CivicsPR.5**  
**6.3.8.CivicsHR.1**  
**SEL**  
**Recognize and identify**  
**Demonstrate an awareness**



# common core state standards

**Career Readiness,  
Life Literacies, & Key Skills**  
**9.4.12.IML.7**

Develop an argument to support a claim regarding a current workplace or societal/ethical issue such as climate change.

**English Language Arts**  
**RH.9-10.3.**

Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; draw connections between the events, to determine whether earlier events caused later ones or simply preceded them.

**NJSLSA.SL3.**  
Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

**NJSLSA.SL4.**  
Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

**NJSLSA.W1.**  
Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

**NJSLSA.W5.**  
Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.

**NJSLSA.W7.**  
Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects, utilizing an inquiry-based research process, based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

**SEL**  
**Recognize and identify** the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of others.  
**Demonstrate an awareness** of the differences among individuals, groups, and others’ cultural backgrounds.  
**Utilize positive communication** and social skills to interact effectively with others.

**Social Studies**  
**6.1.8.CivicsDP.3.a**  
Use primary and secondary sources to assess whether or not the ideals found in the Declaration of Independence were fulfilled for women, African Americans, and Native Americans during this time period.

**6.3.8.CivicsHR.1**  
Construct an argument as to the source of human rights and how they are best protected.

**6.3.8.CivicsPR.5**  
: Engage in simulated democratic processes (e.g., legislative hearings, judicial proceedings, elections) to understand how conflicting points of view are addressed in a democratic society.

**FIND THE STANDARDS**  
For more detailed information on the standards, visit these websites:  
NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS  
[corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy](http://corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy)  
NATIONAL SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS  
[socialstudies.org/standards](http://socialstudies.org/standards)  
NATIONAL CORE ARTS ANCHOR STANDARDS  
[nationalartsstandards.org](http://nationalartsstandards.org)



Walter McMillian (left) after his conviction was overturned in 1993, with lawyer Bryan Stevenson (right) © EJI

## vocabulary

**Circumstantial Evidence**  
Indirect evidence that does not, on its face, prove a fact in issue but gives rise to a logical inference that the fact exists

**Death Row**  
A prison block or section for prisoners sentenced to death

**Empathy**  
The ability to understand and share the feelings of another

**Exoneration**  
The action of officially absolving someone from blame; vindication

**Exoneree**  
A person who is shown to be not guilty of a crime for which he or she was formerly found guilty

**Forensic Evidence**  
Evidence obtained by scientific methods such as ballistics, blood test and DNA test and used in court

**Implicit Bias**  
Attitudes towards, or associated stereotypes with, people without conscious knowledge

**Incarceration**  
The state of being confined in prison; imprisonment

**Racial Bias**  
A personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment made solely on an individual’s race

**Wrongful Conviction**  
When the person convicted is factually innocent of the charges; a conviction in which procedural errors violated the convicted person’s rights



# JUST

MICHAEL B. JORDAN  
JAMIE FOXX  
AND BRIE LARSON

# MERCY

EVERY GENERATION HAS ITS HERO.  
MEET OURS.

WARNER BROS. PICTURES PRESENTS

IN ASSOCIATION WITH ENDEAVOR CONTENT / ONE COMMUNITY / PARTICIPANT MEDIA / MACRO

A GIL NETTER PRODUCTION AN OUTLIER SOCIETY PRODUCTION MICHAEL B. JORDAN "JUST MERCY"

JAMIE FOXX ROB MORGAN TIM BLAKE NELSON RACE SPALL AND BRIE LARSON

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS FRANCHINE JAMISON-TANCHUCK MUSIC BY GABE HILFER MUSIC BY JOEL P. WEST EDITOR NAT SANDERS, A.C.E.

PRODUCED BY SHARON SEYMOUR DIRECTED BY BRETT PAUL AN EXECUTIVE PRODUCER BRIAN STEVENSON ANKE DRAKE

CASTING BY JULIA KUYKENDALL GABRIEL HAMMOND DANIEL HAMMOND SCOTT BUONICK JEFF SKOLL

CHARLES D. KING BASED UPON THE BOOK BY BRIAN STEVENSON WRITTEN BY DESTIN DANIEL CRETTON & ANDREW LAMHAM

PRODUCED BY GIL NETTER, A.C.E. ASHER GOLDSTEIN, P.G.A. MICHAEL B. JORDAN DIRECTED BY DESTIN DANIEL CRETTON

## resources

### Websites

Equal Justice Initiative  
[eji.org/about](https://eji.org/about)

Equal Justice Initiative: *Just Mercy* Movie Discussion Guide  
[eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/just-mercy-discussion-topics.pdf](https://eji.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/just-mercy-discussion-topics.pdf)

Vox Media interview with Bryan Stevenson  
[vox.com/21327742/bryan-stevenson-the-ezra-klein-show-america-slavery-healing-racism-george-floyd-protests](https://www.vox.com/21327742/bryan-stevenson-the-ezra-klein-show-america-slavery-healing-racism-george-floyd-protests)

The Legacy Museum:  
The National Memorial for Peace and Justice:  
[musemandmemorial.eji.org/museum](https://musemandmemorial.eji.org/museum)

Journeys in Film: *Just Mercy* Curriculum  
[journeysinfilm.org](https://journeysinfilm.org)

The Innocence Project  
[innocenceproject.org](https://innocenceproject.org)

Death Penalty Information Center  
[deathpenaltyinfo.org](https://deathpenaltyinfo.org)

Race and Wrongful Convictions in the United States 2022  
[law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Race%20Report%20Preview.pdf](https://law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Race%20Report%20Preview.pdf)

A History of Racial Injustice Daily Calendar  
[calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice](https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice)

*Just Mercy* (Book & Movie)  
[justmercy.eji.org](https://justmercy.eji.org)

Bryan Stevenson  
[eji.org/bryan-stevenson](https://eji.org/bryan-stevenson)

Winfred Rembert  
[winfredrembert.com](https://winfredrembert.com)

Elizabeth Catlett  
[nmaahc.si.edu/latinx/elizabeth-catlett](https://nmaahc.si.edu/latinx/elizabeth-catlett)

Monument Lab | Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, Building  
Restorative Justice Across the African Diaspora  
[shorturl.at/cwG78](https://shorturl.at/cwG78)

NYU | Steinhhardt  
[steinhardt.nyu.edu/people/donna-walker-kuhne](https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/people/donna-walker-kuhne)

### Videos

*Just Mercy* official trailer  
[youtu.be/GVQbeG5yW78](https://youtu.be/GVQbeG5yW78)

Bryan Stevenson's TED Talks  
[ted.com/speakers/bryan\\_stevenson](https://ted.com/speakers/bryan_stevenson)

### More from NJPAC

NJPAC | About NJPAC  
[njpac.org/about](https://njpac.org/about)

NJPAC Resources | *Just Mercy*  
[njpac.org/arts-education/teacher-resources](https://njpac.org/arts-education/teacher-resources)

NJPAC Arts Education programs  
[njpac.org/arts-education](https://njpac.org/arts-education)

NJPAC Standing in Solidarity series  
[njpac.org/series/standing-in-solidarity](https://njpac.org/series/standing-in-solidarity)



## njpac staff

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### NJPAC Arts Education performances team:

Randal Croudy, Natalie Dreyer, Rosa Hyde, Danielle Vauters. On the Mic is an NJPAC Arts Education production, produced in partnership with CM Studios. NJPAC and CM Studios are located in Essex County, New Jersey, situated on the traditional territory of the Leni Lenape people.

## the arts in your school

**In-School Residencies:** NJPAC teaching artists come right to your school to teach the performing arts to your students. Our super-flexible in-person residencies are designed to meet your needs, and you'll have a dedicated program manager to help you every step of the way. It's the perfect program to keep your students creating, connecting and expressing themselves through the magic of the arts.

**Professional Development:** Calling all educators! Expand your teaching skills, deepen your curriculum and give yourself a creative boost in NJPAC's forward-thinking professional development workshops. Our virtual PD programs are for teachers all the way from pre-K to high school, and include hip hop, dance, storytelling, theater, music and more. Not only will you learn something... you'll also have fun and be inspired.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please email our education sales team at [artseducation@njpac.org](mailto:artseducation@njpac.org). Or visit [njpac.org/education](http://njpac.org/education)

Major support for SchoolTime provided by



Generous support for SchoolTime provided, in part, by



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+ deceased

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In partnership with



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## study the arts at njpac

**Saturday Programs:** NJPAC's Saturday programs are geared towards students at every level — from those who dream of starring on Broadway to those who are still learning their scales. Students work with professional artists to build technique and develop their own creative style in hip hop, jazz, theater, musical theater and symphonic band.

**Summer Programs:** Want to begin to explore the arts? Or immerse yourself in the study of one genre? Then join us at NJPAC next summer in one of seven programs that spark the creativity in every child through the study of music, dance and theater.