Steppenwolf for Young Adults presents

The House on Mango Street

by Tanya Saracho

based on the novel by Sandra Cisneros

directed by Hallie Gordon

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Introduction

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza navigates the challenges of growing up and begins to come to terms with her own identity. As Esperanza struggles to define herself, the people who populate Mango Street deeply inform her developing worldview. Throughout the story she garners bits and pieces of advice from her mother and neighbors, and pays close attention to the lives of women on her block. On Mango Street, Esperanza oscillates between the girlish fun of bike riding and skipping rope and confronting mature issues of death and sexuality.

When the play comes to a close, the audience has witnessed Esperanza’s definitive transformation from a youthful girl to a self-aware adolescent. The journey is not an easy one – this formative year in Esperanza’s life is laden with obstacles and hardships, but is simultaneously balanced with laughter, joy and a developing sense of independence.

Throughout the story, Esperanza must balance this quest for identity with her emotional ties to the people and culture of Mango Street.

This study guide will delve into three of *The House on Mango Street’s* core themes:

**Identity**

How does a person construct a solid identity? And how much do our family, heritage and neighborhood define who we are? Can we ever really shed our roots and should we want to?

**Responsibility**

What role does responsibility play in our lives? Is it possible to stay true to oneself, while still being responsible to our family and community?

**Gender**

How much is Esperanza’s coming-of-age experience is informed by her gender? Do women and men occupy different roles in today’s society and has the answer to that question shifted since *The House on Mango Street’s* publication?
The Characters of Mango Street

Mango Street is comprised of complex, colorful characters who create a vivid picture of Esperanza’s Chicago community. No two people in the neighborhood are alike and each has a story to tell.

**Esperanza**  
Played by Sandra Delgado  

*The House on Mango Street* is Esperanza’s story. She is a Mexican-American immigrant, the eldest child in her family, and a burgeoning writer. Though she dreams of one day escaping her run-down house on Mango Street, she eventually realizes that her identity is inextricably tied to the family, friends and heritage of Mango Street.

**Carlos**  
Played by Tony Sancho  

Carlos is Esperanza's younger brother, though we actually do not see them together often in the play. “Girls with girls,” Carlos says in the second scene, “That's how it is.” As the play progresses we see Carlos trying to leave his childhood behind, by refusing to answer to “Carlito” and not kissing his mother on the cheek as he leaves for school.

**Mama**  
Played by Mari Stratton  

Mama is Esperanza's mother. She is bilingual and can sing opera, but is too scared to take the train downtown alone, though there are many things she wants to see. “You know what I would like to do one day?” she says to Esperanza, “I’d like to go to the ballet or to see a play.” She regrets dropping out of school at a young age and wants to make sure Esperanza does not make the same mistake.

**Papa**  
Played by Ricardo Gutierrez  

Papa is Esperanza's father. He arrived in the United States unable to speak English, but was determined to learn the language – to “swim in the letters” – despite his father’s warning that a man might lose himself in the “watery vowels” of America. When his father dies, Papa entrusts Esperanza to deliver the news to her younger siblings.
Ne nny
Played by Gina Cornejo

Nenny is Esperanza's younger sister. She is at a completely different stage of her life than her older siblings; still very much immersed in childhood and a safe distance away from the responsibilities of adolescence. She looks up to Esperanza and always wants to be included in the older girls’ games – though she sometimes does not grasp the significance of what is being discussed around her.

Rachel
Played by Christina Nieves

Rachel and her sister Lucy live next door to Esperanza on Mango Street. Though Esperanza is warned in the second scene of the play not to speak to these two “raggedy girls,” the three become fast friends after they purchase a bike together. However, as Esperanza grows up throughout the course of the play, she has a difficult time connecting to these childhood friends.

Alicia
Played by Liza Fernandez

Alicia lives near Esperanza on Mango Street. She is older than the other girls on the block and attends college in the city. Though Rachel claims that Alicia is stuck-up, she opens her home to Esperanza, brings her books from the library, and acts as a role model for Esperanza. She is a young woman with a lot on her plate: in addition to commuting many miles to attend school, she is also responsible for cleaning and cooking for her demanding father.

Sally
Played by Belinda Cervantes

Sally is a young girl who Esperanza befriends toward the end of the play. Though she is roughly Esperanza's age, she seems much older - wearing dark makeup and a short skirt to attract the attention of boys on her block. Sally comes from a strictly religious home and is obviously afraid of her father. “I don’t even laugh around him,” she tells Esperanza. While it's easy to dismiss Sally as a “bad” girl and a negative influence, her difficult home life gives her character depth and multidimensionality.
QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Consider the Characters

1. Why do you think Esperanza rejects her friendship with Rachel and Lucy midway through the story? And why do you think she eventually returns to them?

2. Why do you think Papa asks Esperanza to convey the news about her abuelito to her siblings? What does he hope she will learn from delivering this news?

3. Why do the other girls consider Alicia “stuck up”? What is it about going to college in the city that isolates her from the other girls on the block?

4. Why do you think Esperanza is initially drawn to Sally?
The Minor Characters of Mango Street

There are a handful characters we only encounter once or twice throughout the play, but each serve a very specific purpose in Esperanza’s story.

**Uncle Nacho**
Esperanza’s Uncle Nacho helps her feel beautiful despite her old, raggedy shoes during her cousin’s baptism party. “Don’t you know you’re the prettiest girl here?” he asks, when Esperanza refuses to dance *cumbia* at the party.

**Mamacita**
Mamacita desperately misses her home country and is too scared to speak English or leave the house. Esperanza can hear her husband yelling at her from the street below, reprimanding her for being homesick. Mamacita is one of the many “women looking out of windows” that propel Esperanza toward a brighter future.

**Rafaela**
Rafaela is another woman who is trapped on Mango Street. She used to be the most beautiful dancer on her island before coming to America. “No one could trap me and keep me as their partner all night,” she tells the girls. But now, she rarely comes down from her apartment, because she is, as Rachel says, “too beautiful to look at.”

**Marin**
Marin dreams of working at a real job downtown in nice clothes and meeting a man on the subway who will take her away from Mango Street. After showing her a love letter from her boyfriend, Marin tries to teach Esperanza about how to deal with men. “Only let them look,” Marin says, “don’t let them get inside you for real.”

**Tito**
Tito poses a severe threat to Esperanza, who has very little experience with boys like him. The kind of flirtation he engages in with Sally makes Esperanza uncomfortable and she is altogether unprepared to fend off his advances.

**The Three Sisters**
At Rachel’s little brother’s funeral, the three sisters appear to Esperanza and offer her guidance at a time when she needs it most. It’s unclear what exactly these three sisters are – if they are ghosts, sprits or hallucinations – but one thing is certain: they embody the wisdom of Mango Street’s women. They appear to tell Esperanza that she must always return to Mango Street, despite her burning desire to go away forever, for the ones who cannot leave as easily as she.

**QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM**

**Consider the Characters**

1. In what ways is Esperanza’s mother similar to Mamacita and Rafaela? In what ways is she different?

2. What is Marin trying to say to Esperanza with her advice about men? And how do you reconcile this advice with Marin’s obvious infatuation with her boyfriend?

3. What do you think Rachel means when she says that Rafaela is “too beautiful to look at?” What might happen if her husband unlocks on the door on Tuesday evenings?

4. Why do you think the three sisters appear to Esperanza at Rachel’s brother’s funeral?
Born in 1954, Sandra Cisneros began writing stories as a middle school student. She is the third child and only daughter in a family of seven children and spent much of her early years visiting the local library. “Librarians should be given Nobel Prizes for what they do for humanity,” Sandra writes on her website.

Growing up, Sandra’s father expected her to fill a traditional female role - one that started with getting married and ended with raising children. It was Cisneros’ mother who cultivated her children’s love of reading, getting Sandra and her brother’s library cards before they could even read.

Until she was in 3rd grade, Sandra’s family moved from neighborhood to neighborhood and also traveled back and forth from Mexico. Her father had immigrated to the United States years earlier but never quite overcame his homesickness and longing for his country, so the Cisneros family was at times uprooted. The constant moving rendered Cisneros a quiet and introverted girl and she often retreated to the library to immerse herself in books. Finally in 1966, the family settled in a mixed neighborhood on Chicago’s north side. It was the people of this Chicago street that would later color the pages of Cisneros’ first major work, The House on Mango Street.

After graduating from high school, Cisneros enrolled at Loyola University. “In retrospect, I’m lucky my father believed daughters were meant for husbands. It meant it didn’t matter if I majored in something silly like English,” Cisneros wrote in Glamour Magazine. She earned her B.A. in English in 1976.
Following her undergraduate education, Cisneros was accepted into the Iowa Writer’s Workshop. She admits she was terribly insecure during her first year in the program, unsure of her own skills and intellect. “What did I, Sandra Cisneros, know? What could I know? My classmates were from the best schools in the country. They had been bred as fine hothouse flowers. I was a yellow weed among the city’s cracks,” she said in an interview with Publisher’s Weekly. After months of imitating the writing of her professors and classmates, Cisneros finally found her own voice by utilizing her past. “I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn’t write about,” Cisneros said.

She returned to Chicago after earning her master’s degree in creative writing and began work at the Latino Youth Alternative High School for high school dropouts returning to finish their educations. She started to read her work around Chicago at various coffee shops and reading series and worked on the manuscript that would become The House on Mango Street. Cisneros later received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, which allowed her to complete the unfinished work. The novel was published in 1984 and was embraced by a relatively small community of booksellers, teachers and librarians. Over time, the book garnered more and more acclaim, eventually showing up on the required reading lists of major universities around the country. But it was not until 1991, when the book was published by Vintage Books (a division of Random House), that it received broad public recognition.

“I decided I would write about something my classmates couldn’t write about.”

She later received the MacArthur Genius Fellowship in 1995, an award that allowed Cisneros to complete her work on the novel Caramelo. Cisneros’ other major works include My Wicked Wicked Ways (a collection of poetry), Loose Woman (a collection of poetry), Hair/Pelitos (a children’s book) and Vintage Cisneros (a collection of various works).

After the success of The House on Mango Street, Cisneros became one of the first Latina writers to receive a major publishing contract. Her collection of short stories, Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories, was published by Random House in 1991.

Sandra now lives in San Antonio, Texas, in house painted bright pink. She is a Writer-in-Residence at Our Lady of the Lake University and just completed a national book tour for the 25th anniversary of The House on Mango Street. “I feel like a cartographer,” Cisneros says of her work, “I’m determined to fill a literary void.” Given Sandra’s important and influential body of work as a writer and activist – it seems she has done just that.
Historical Snapshot: Chicago in the Late 1970s

The world was a very different place thirty years ago and Chicago was a very different city. Take a look at what was happening in Chicago and in the country during the late 1970s, when this production of *The House on Mango Street* takes place.

1976
- Mayor Richard J. Daley, the city's mayor since 1955, dies in office. He hailed from the heavily Irish-American Bridgeport neighborhood on Chicago's South Side and is remembered for his both his fiscal prowess and his unwillingness to integrate the city, despite Chicago's reputation for segregation.

1978
- In the landmark Supreme Court decision *The University of California Regents v. Bakke*, the court bans the “quota system” but affirms the constitutionality of programs that give advantage to minority students.

1979
- The Sears Tower is completed, surpassing The World Trade Center as the tallest building in the world.
- Jane M. Byrne, the city's first female mayor, is elected to office. Chicago is the largest city in the country to have had a female mayor. Byrne would later be narrowly defeated in 1983 by the city's first black mayor, Harold Washington.

1980
- President Reagan is elected, defeating Democrat Jimmy Carter. During his time in office, President Reagan granted amnesty to 3 million immigrants living in America, but also signed an act criminalizing the hiring and recruitment of illegal immigrants into the workforce.

Questions for the Classroom

1. Do you think Esperanza's story would be different if it was set in 2009 as opposed to 1979? How so?

2. Do you still think women today are “trapped” like the women on Mango Street? Or have the expectations of women changed since 1979?

3. We now have a Latina member of the United States Supreme Court. Do you think ethnic barriers have broken down since Esperanza's time? Or does our society still struggle to achieve equal opportunity across ethnic boundaries?
Coming to the United States: Latino Immigration to Chicago

Mexican immigration to The United States began to gather momentum after 1910, spurred by the Mexican Revolution and rapid American industrialization. The city of Chicago specifically employed *enganxistas*, or labor recruiters, along the northern border of Mexico, to entice young male workers to the city. It was often a tough sell. The journey to Chicago was far longer than the trip to southern Texas or California. When they did arrive, Mexican immigrants worked mainly on farms, in factories, or, as in the case of Sandra Cisneros’ mother’s family, on the railroad.

As more women began to arrive, Mexican immigrants started to organize *colonistas*, or residential enclaves, in the Back of the Yards, South Chicago and Near West Side neighborhoods. These communities provided a stable entry point with a common language for new Spanish-speaking immigrants. However, the *colonistas* were not altogether segregated: Hispanics lived together with Italian and Polish Chicagoans and often worked collectively as a united working-class front. As their population grew, Mexican-Americans also began to organize newspapers, labor unions and mutual benefit societies (called *mutualistas*). These *mutualistas* required monthly dues and supported their members through times of unemployment and helped pay travel expenses to Mexico in the event of a family death.

Immigration from Mexico and other Latin American countries continued to grow throughout WWII: between 1943 and 1945, at least fifteen thousand *baceros* (guest workers) arrived in Chicago to work in wartime plants. In the early 1950s, the Latino community founded the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), an organization that still fights for the educational and civil rights of the American-Latino community.

In 1960, there were at least 56,000 Mexican-Americans living in Chicago – and that number was growing steadily. By the mid-1970s, a large portion of the Mexican population moved into the once-Czech Pilsen neighborhood and into *La Villita* (Little Village) in the city’s South Lawndale area. The area has become known for its colorful *muralistas* and in 1987 became the home of the National Museum of Mexican Art. Puerto-Rican Americans initially settled in the city’s Northwest Side and Humbolt Park neighborhoods and Cuban Americans found their niche in the diverse Uptown neighborhood and in Rogers Park. At the dawn of the millennium, Chicago had at least 530,000 Latino Americans living within its city limits.
Chicago’s Neighborhoods

Chicago’s diverse neighborhoods are filled to the brim with history and heritage. You can drive just ten minutes and be in a completely different world, surrounded by unique ethnic scents and colorful murals or tall shiny buildings that stretch to the sky. The word that is often used to describe Chicago neighborhoods is **character** – each little enclave is like its own mini-city with its own story to tell.

**Humboldt Park**

Famous for its annual Taste of Polonia festival, this northwest Chicago neighborhood has a heavy Polish-American presence. It’s also home to the famous Gateway Theatre, an old movie house that was designed to look like the Royal Palace in Warsaw.

**Jefferson Park**

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Writing in Prose

- Sandra Cisneros drew inspiration from her neighborhood, the street she lived on, and the people who populated her childhood to craft *The House on Mango Street*. Write a short vignette about your neighborhood, employing Cisneros’ attention to vivid description and detail.

Writing in Scene

- *The House on Mango Street* adapter Tanya Saracho took Cisneros’ words and crafted them into an active story, with short scenes that are packed with dramatic action. Write a short scene about your block, using the people who live near you as characters.

EXERCISES FOR THE CLASSROOM

Rogers Park
Chicago’s northernmost neighborhood, Rogers Park is an extremely diverse community with almost 80 languages spoken within its borders. Rogers Park is home to numerous ethnic groups, including a Jewish Orthodox community and a large Indian community – both of which share Devon Avenue as their main thoroughfare.

Pilsen
First settled by Czechs who named the neighborhood after the 4th largest city in the Czech Republic, Pilsen is now home to some of the city’s most beautiful murals and historical churches. The neighborhood is 85 percent Hispanic, with 18th Street as its central hub.

Bronzeville
A hub of African-American history and culture, Bronzeville first came alive in the early 20th century as black citizens fled southern oppression and settled in this south side Chicago neighborhood. Famous civic leaders like Ida B. Wells and artists like Gwendolyn Brooks contributed to Bronzeville’s development.

Lakeview
Home of the Chicago Cubs, Lakeview is the second largest Chicago neighborhood, with just under 95,000 people. Comprised of a majority Caucasian population, Lakeview’s boundaries are marked by Irving Park Road and Diversey Parkway with Clark Street as the neighborhood’s center.
Identity: The distinguishing character or personality of an individual. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

What tools do we use to define ourselves? And how much do our neighborhood, heritage and family contribute to our personal identity? In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza is in the process of solidifying who she is and what she wants to become.

We don’t get to choose the house we grow up in or the neighborhood in which we spend our teenage years. So what if the place we live in does not fit the identity we are trying to create for ourselves? What if we feel estranged from the things that are meant to define us?

**What Defines Us?**

- The house we live in?
- The family we come from?
- The heritage of our ancestors?
- The friends we associate with?
- The dreams we harbor for our future?
In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza initially rejects her dilapidated red house and the street she lives on “This is not my house,” she says to Alicia, “I don't belong here. I don’t ever want to come from here. I don't want people to know I’m from here.”

But as the play unfolds, we see Esperanza realize that she is inextricably tied to Mango Street. The house is crumbling, the street is run-down and the neighborhood is noisy – but Mango Street is part of who she is. It is part of Esperanza’s identity.

“You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase that. Even if you try,” one of the three mystical sisters says to Esperanza at the end of the play. Though she might eventually leave Mango Street behind, the sisters remind Esperanza that her neighborhood will always be an integral part of her personal story.

*The House on Mango Street* teaches us the importance of embracing our roots, but also of realizing our personal potential. Esperanza cannot shed her background: she will always be the child of immigrant parents, she will always point to the house on Mango Street as her childhood home and she will always call Nenny and Carlos her sister and brother. But what about the *next* step?

Esperanza has big dreams for her future identity. “One day I'll own my own house, a big one I can point to. Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. A house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before a poem.”

Throughout the play, Esperanza learns how to blend what she wants for her future with the realities of her past. As she gets more comfortable in her own skin, Esperanza finds a way to incorporate Mango Street and all its stories into her identity, while still carving her own future.

**QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM**

1. What does a nice house represent to Esperanza? Is it really about living somewhere fancy or does she simply want a place of her own?

2. What role does Esperanza’s family play in shaping her identity? How much is she influenced by her mother’s emphasis on education and her father’s ties to Mexico?

3. What role does being Latina play in Esperanza’s search for herself? She doesn’t incorporate Spanish into her speech the way her parents do, but in what other ways does her heritage shine through?
Who is Esperanza?

Consider other characters on Mango Street

**How do they influence Esperanza’s identity?**

As we grow older, we look around and take note of the people in our lives who we respect the most. We also recognize that there are some people living lives we do not admire and we try to avoid those paths and choose others.

**What effects do the following characters have on Esperanza’s search for identity?**

- Alicia who goes to college downtown
- Sally who takes Esperanza to the Monkey Garden
- Mamacita who cannot speak English
- Rachel who lives next door
- Rafaela who cannot go out on Tuesdays
Esperanza wants to become a writer and, even at her young age, people start to notice her talent. “You are so good with words,” her Papa says, “You’re growing up to be so good with words. You’re a good swimmer in them.” Esperanza uses words and writing as tools with which to search for herself.

What does the poem below say about Esperanza’s identity?

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I want to be
Like the waves on the sea
Like the clouds in the wind
But I’m me.
One day I’ll jump
Out of my skin
I’ll shake the sky
Like a hundred violins.
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**Connecting to the play**

• Do you have a certain passion that allows you to express yourself?

**EXERCISES FOR THE CLASSROOM**

• Draw an “identity” pie chart for yourself that includes the following: neighborhood, family, heritage, friends and dreams. What percentage of your identity pie chart is filled by each?

• Write a poem that starts with the words “I want to be,” just like Esperanza’s poem above. But instead of stating a specific occupation, choose a visual image like Esperanza did with the waves on the sea.

• Write another poem that begins with the words “I remember.” Employ the same visual imagery as above, this time capturing a specific memory from your childhood.
Exploring Themes: Responsibility

The House on Mango Street is often referred to as a “coming-of-age” story. But what does “coming-of-age” actually mean? Does the term simply entail moving from childhood to adolescence? Or does it also imply the taking on of responsibility?

When the play first begins, we see Esperanza as a young girl, riding bikes and skipping rope with her friends. But as the play progresses, we see her embrace a certain level of responsibility for the people around her – from her friends and family to her larger community. Most importantly, we see her begin to take responsibility for her own hopes and dreams.

This process is not always an easy one; Esperanza does not necessarily feel ready for the new weight placed on her shoulders. “Why me?” Esperanza asks when her father informs her that she must tell her younger siblings about her abuelito’s death. “Because you are the oldest,” he replies. “You’re almost a woman now. Casi casi.”

Who are we responsible for?

• Our family?
Esperanza is the eldest child in her family and that position inherently comes with a certain level of responsibility – whether Esperanza wants it or not. “Since Nenny comes right after me, she is my responsibility,” Esperanza explains. “In the morning for getting up, when we’re walking to school, when we’re coming back.”

• Our friends?
When Rachel’s little brother passes away, Esperanza reaches out and helps her friend deal with the loss. The Esperanza we met in the first few scenes of the play might not have known what to do in such a delicate situation, but the Esperanza at the end of the play knows how to help her friend. “I’ll go look for you,” Esperanza says when Rachel cannot approach her brother’s casket, “I’ll go and it will count as if you looked.”

• Our community?
When the three sisters visit Esperanza, they place an additional responsibility on her shoulders. “When you leave,” they say, “you must always remember to come back for the others. A circle, you understand?” Though Esperanza is hesitant at first, she eventually internalizes the importance of what the three sisters have asked of her and agrees to accept responsibility for her larger community.

• Ourselves?
Before a person can take on responsibility for friends, family and a larger community, they must accept responsibility for him or herself. “Go to school,” Mama says to Esperanza, “Got to take care all on your own.” For Esperanza, taking responsibility for herself means packing bags of books and paper and setting out to become a writer. And at the play’s end, that is exactly what she plans to do.
Connecting to the play

- Is there a person in your life who you watch over like Esperanza watches over Nenny? Do you think this responsibility helps you grow or holds you back?

- Can you think of a time when you were asked to take on additional responsibility in your family? Did you hesitate like Esperanza or did you embrace the new challenge?

- Do you ever find that taking on multiple responsibilities at once – for your friends, family, community and self – produces conflict? Or can you juggle these responsibilities without much trouble?

QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

1. How has being the eldest child shaped Esperanza's character? Do you think she'd be a different person if she were the middle or youngest sibling?

2. Consider Esperanza's friendship with Rachel. How does that relationship change as Esperanza grows up throughout the play?

3. Given that Esperanza wants to leave Mango Street, is the three sisters' request that she return to her childhood neighborhood compromising this dream?
Exploring Themes: Gender

How much of Esperanza's story is influenced by her gender? What parts of *The House on Mango Street* are universal and what parts are specific to a female experience?

What does it mean to wear high heels?

When Esperanza and her friends slip on their neighbor's high heels, something amazing happens: all three girls are instantly transformed. “Look at my legs!” Rachel yells, “They are long like a train car.” In the high heels, Esperanza and her friends feel like women for the first time.

Initially, there is nothing dangerous about their dress-up game. It is not until the girls are approached by an older man on the street that a sense of unease falls over the group. “Rachel,” the man says, “You are prettier than a yellow taxi cab. You know what? If I give you a dollar, will you kiss me?”

The advent of self-awareness is a fundamental part of growing up. In this formative moment, Esperanza and her friends are suddenly made aware of their own bodies and the way they appear to the outside world.

Compare and Contrast: Hips versus High Heels

The “Hips” scene is another moment when Esperanza and her friends become acutely aware of their developing bodies. However, the two scenes are vastly different in tone and connotation. What are the key differences between the “hips” scene and the “high heels” scene? In what ways are these moments similar?

Women behind windows

As Esperanza looks around Mango Street, she notices a disturbing pattern: many of the neighborhood women are trapped. “I hate this street,” she says, “Too many women looking out of windows.”

Mamacita who cannot speak English, Rafaela who cannot leave her house on Tuesdays and Alicia who must cook and clean for her father – all these women inspire Esperanza to become her own person. She rejects the notion that a man must carve her path and vows never to be the kind of woman who spends her life staring at the world from a window. “I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their neck on the window waiting for the ball and chain,” Esperanza proclaims.

Rebelling against machismo

Esperanza's promise to herself is a firm statement against *machismo* – a Spanish word for masculine pride, which usually results in the objectification and submission of women. For centuries, women around the globe have fought against different incarnations of *machismo* or sexism. *Machismo* can manifest in several ways – from simple catcalls on the street to discrimination in the workplace.

Consider...

Do you think the *machismo* culture has declined since 1979? If the play took place in today's world, do you think Esperanza would see more or fewer women looking out of windows?
In the Monkey Garden

When Esperanza first meets Sally, the differences between the two girls are immediately apparent: Sally is smoking a cigarette, she is wearing dark eye makeup and high heels and speaks about men with a confidence that initially impresses Esperanza. “Here, pull up your skirt like that,” Sally instructs Esperanza before the two head off to the Monkey Garden.

Consider...
What is it about Sally that Esperanza finds alluring? Though she knows better than to visit the Monkey Garden at night, why do you think she follows her new friend?

Learning literary tools: Foreshadowing
Even before Tito enters, there is something unsettling about Sally’s character. What clues do the audience receive that she is not a good friend for Esperanza? How does the audience know, even before Esperanza does, that the trip to the Monkey Garden will end in violence?

Making sense of the assault
We do not know for certain what exactly transpires during Tito’s attack on Esperanza. The details are intentionally vague, perhaps, to underscore that any violence against women, regardless of the specifics, is wrong.

• Do you think Esperanza is changed after the violence in the Monkey Garden?
• How do you think this traumatic experience will shape her, if at all?
• Note that the assault is not the final scene of the play – what do you think this tells us about Esperanza’s resilience?

QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

1. What other tools are used throughout the play, aside from hips and high heels, to represent womanhood?

2. How does Tito employ machismo to get what he wants?

3. Do you think The House on Mango Street is ultimately a female story? Or is it a universal story about growing up?

Compare and Contrast: Alicia and Sally
In many ways these two characters are polar opposites, but Esperanza is actually drawn to both of them for a similar reason: the prospect of leaving Mango Street. Both girls represent modes of escape from Mango Street. What mode of escape does Sally endorse? What mode does Alicia?
Whitney Dibo: Why did you want to adapt *The House on Mango Street*? What is the origin of your interest in the book?

*Tanya Saracho:* This book is such a masterpiece, and so iconic in our community, that I was originally scared to adapt it. But I just love Esperanza so much, and I loved the book so much growing up, that I discovered fear was the wrong approach. Now I'm just really excited to adapt the book for our community at the 25th anniversary of its publication. When it first came out, *The House on Mango Street* was groundbreaking for the Latino literary community.

**WD:** Do you remember reading it when it first came out?

**TS:** This was the second book I was given when I was learning English. I came here when I was 12 years old, and in my ESL class the first book they gave me was *Ramona Quimby*, and the second one they gave me was *The House on Mango Street*. And this one made sense to me.

**WD:** Did you come back to the book when you were older?

**TS:** Later on in high school, when I was rebelling against reading any books at all for awhile, this was the one I came back to. It was one of those years when I needed to return to something that resonated with me, to which I connected. And *The House on Mango Street* did that for me. It's special that way.

**WD:** Do you have a favorite chapter in the book?

**TS:** When I first talked to Sandra Cisneros about my adaptation, she asked me to propose a scene to her. And I knew right away which scene was clearest in my mind: the hip scene. The one where the girls are first discovering that they have hips—while jumping rope.
WD: Why does that one stick out for you?

TS: Because I really remember the first time I read it. I could barely speak English. But even then I understood that these girls were using something very familiar—the double-dutch game—to sort out their womanhoods. A lot of girls communicate like this; we use games and social interactions to try and understand the complexities of growing up. “Hips” was actually the first scene I ever wrote for this adaptation.

WD: Given the book is structured as series of short vignettes, was it ever challenging to find a dramatic plot to follow?

TS: The plot was there all along, I just needed to draw it out. The name of the game is to listen to the rhythm of the book. I call Sandra's short vignettes little “puffs of images.” Esperanza is in there—these are images from one year of her life. I just had to draw a shape around it, around her story, but it’s really all in the book.

WD: What do you think her story is really about?

TS: It’s a story about coming of age, about growing up. But it’s also about wanting and desire, and not having, and being ashamed of that. It’s a story about loving the people you’re ashamed of, and embracing your history. It’s also about beautiful characters. That is the gold of the book: these beautiful, vivid characters.

WD: You decided toward the beginning of your process to include music in the production. What do you think music adds to the story?

TS: It’s texture. The city of Chicago is very musical to me. And in Sandra's book, I could hear the rhythms of the late seventies. This was the start of the Salsa scene in New York and by 1979 that music had come to Chicago. With the dawning of Salsa, the import of Cumbia from Mexico and Columbia, and the burgeoning of the hip-hop movement—the city was alive with music. When I first read The House on Mango Street with the hope of adapting it, the book sang back to me rather than spoke to me.

WD: That’s right; we can’t forget that Esperanza is coming of age 30 years ago. What effect do you think the time period has on her story?

TS: I think if we adapted The House on Mango Street in today’s world, with Facebook and Blackberries, it would be an extremely different book. I don’t know many people that let their 10 and 12 year-olds bike around in the city anymore without supervision, for example. It was a different time. It doesn’t feel like a book for the internet era, for the videogame era.

WD: And what about Chicago? Why must Esperanza’s story live here?

TS: I know the story is universal, but these snippets of life are so Chicago to me. It’s a book that honors the amazing city that we live in, but doesn’t shy away from the fact that the city isn’t all beautiful. But there is beauty in its roughness.

WD: What do you hope students will take away from the production?

TS: It’s funny; I never know how to answer that question. All I know is that I love Esperanza and, if you encounter her at the right moment in your life, her story can really make a big impact. And even though this story is not just for a Latino audience, I do hope that Latinos will feel represented in this production and see themselves reflected in the story, the way they did 25 years ago with Sandra’s book.
Tell your students how to get involved with Steppenwolf for Young Adults!

Apply to the Steppenwolf Young Adult Council


The Young Adult Council is a unique after-school program for passionate and motivated high school students who wish to learn the inner-workings of professional theatre from the most celebrated artists in the city. In addition to invaluable face-time with these leading professionals, Council members attend the best plays in Chicago, learn how to analyze and speak about these plays, and organize events for their peers around Steppenwolf productions in hopes of inspiring a new generation of theatre enthusiasts and practitioners.

Council members will receive a travel stipend for their commitment to rigorous and exciting work.

For more information about the Young Adult Council, visit steppenwolf.org/education or contact Steppenwolf for Young Adults Program Coordinator Whitney Dibo at wdibo@steppenwolf.org.

Participate in the Steppenwolf Documentary Film Contest

In partnership with the Chicago Public Library’s YOUmedia

What is special about your neighborhood? In Sandra Cisneros’ book The House on Mango Street, Esperanza's Chicago neighborhood comes alive through vivid description and colorful detail. Share with us the unique identity of your neighborhood through a creative film documentary project. In 5 minutes or less, give us a guided tour of the people, places and experiences that define your neighborhood.

The winner will receive an iPod Touch and tickets to Steppenwolf for Young Adults’ second production, A Separate Peace.

Films due Monday, December 14, 2009

Mail electronically to:
wdibo@steppenwolf.org

Or mail a DVD to:
Steppenwolf Administrative Offices
c/o Whitney Dibo
758 W. North Ave
Chicago, IL 60610

Please visit the Steppenwolf for Young Adults website to download the application:
www.steppenwolf.org/education/

Don’t have access to a video camera or editing equipment? Visit YOUmedia - the Chicago Public Library’s brand new digital space located at the Harold Washington Library, 400 S. State Street. At YOUmedia, students can check out the equipment they'll need to make a movie, and also receive guidance from YOUmedia mentors.

YOUmedia is accessible to students with a valid Chicago Public Library card. For more information visit YOUmediachicago.org.
Join us for the Steppenwolf MaTEENée Series

See. Think. Speak.

The MaTEENée Series is a special opportunity for high school students to score an affordable ticket to a Steppenwolf production, meet Chicago’s most celebrated artists and connect with other teens who are passionate about theatre.

Each MaTEENée ticket includes dinner after the show.

$15 per show

All performances are at 1650 North Halsted.

To purchase tickets, call Audience Services at (312) 335-1650 and mention the appropriate source code. Or, you can arrive at the theatre ½ hour before the show begins and purchase your tickets at the door.

Upcoming MaTEENés:

**American Buffalo**
Saturday, February 6th at 3 p.m.
Source Code: 5844

**A Separate Peace**
Saturday, March 6th at 3 p.m.
Source Code: 5845

**The Brother/Sister Plays**
Saturday, April 3rd at 3 p.m.
Source Code: 5846

For more information about the series, contact Steppenwolf for Young Adults Program Coordinator Whitney Dibo at wdibo@steppenwolf.org.

Pictured at left:
Top: Students grab a bite to eat after the Glass Menagerie MaTEENée last fall.
Middle: Young Adult Council member Grace McQueeny speaks to actor Richard Henzel at the Of Mice and Men MaTEENée.
Bottom: Students discuss The Tempest at a MaTEENée last spring.
Fidelity Investments created the Inspire the Future Award with Steppenwolf to honor educators from Chicago Public Schools who are passionately dedicated to the advancement of youth through theater and the arts in Chicago. The winners receive an Inspire the Future memento and a $2,500 grant to support arts programming for his or her school.

**For Teachers and Principals:**

**The Inspire the Future Award**

Congratulations to our 2008-2009 Fidelity Investments Inspire the Future Award Winners!

- **Edward Cisneros**
  Multicultural Arts High School

- **Susan McDonough**
  Austin Career Education Center

- **Lisa Erhlich-Menard**
  Curie Metro High School

- **Kristen Hanson**
  Lane Tech College Prep

Application materials for the 2009-2010 Inspire the Future Award will become available online at [www.steppenwolf.org/education](http://www.steppenwolf.org/education) during the winter.

For more information on the award please contact Education Associate Lindsey Barlag at lbarlag@steppenwolf.org.
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Steppenwolf for Young Adults is a citywide partner of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) School Partner Program.
“One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will go far away. I will say goodbye to Mango. I will own a house of my own, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from.”

– Esperanza Cordero

*The House on Mango Street*