

ROCHEL GARNER COLEMAN

Shadow Ball: The Story of Black Baseball

Art Form: Theatre
Style: Contemporary
Culture: African American

MEET THE ARTIST:

Rochel Garner Coleman is an actor, singer and storyteller whose career began at the age of nine. Singing professionally with the Berkshire Boys' Choir, he distinguished himself as a soloist performing with Pablo Casals and the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood, MA. His first theatre experience was as a cast member in Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, a production which opened the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. and later traveled to Lincoln Center in New York City. At Indiana University and Colorado College, Rochel studied music and theatre, continuing professional studies at Trinity Repertory Conservatory in Providence, R.I. A talented and charismatic performer, Rochel created the historical portrait of black cowboy Nat Love, as well as other theatre pieces portraying the African American cadets known as the Tuskegee Airmen and the slain civil rights champion, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Shadow Ball tells the story of James Thomas Bell, known as "Cool Papa Bell," the fastest man ever to play baseball. In this one-man show, Rochel Coleman re-creates the life and times of the players of the Negro Leagues from the early 1920's, through the Great Depression, to the breaking of the color barrier by Jackie Robinson's signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. Dressed in reproductions of actual Negro League uniforms, Mr. Coleman uses pantomime and movement to convey the action of the game. Compellingly told with humor and music, this authentic production is truly a home run.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The Negro Leagues: The term "shadow ball" referred to barnstorming black teams of the Negro Leagues who liked to do their pre-game warm-up in pantomime. They threw an invisible ball around the infield, hit and fielded imaginary fly balls, making close plays and diving catches. To the fans in the stands, it all looked real.

The first documentation of African Americans playing baseball comes from the collected papers of a slave brought to the front lines of the Civil War by his owner. He learned the game from soldiers he watched playing the sport. Baseball was played in American colleges by 1880 and team pictures suggest that integrated teams were relatively common. As Jim Crow segregation spread across state boundaries North and South, Negroes were prevented from playing on the same teams with white athletes.

Rube Foster, the father of Black baseball, founded the Negro League in 1920. He organized teams around the country into a body governed by a council of owners. Pennant races developed strong rivalries as the teams traveled from town to town by train, car or bus.

The Negro Leagues flourished during the 1920's but were hit hard by the Great Depression, when the price of admission, fifty cents a game, became a luxury. The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his "New Deal" politics paved the way for the integration of baseball. Jackie Robinson's signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 and Satchel Paige's signing with the Cleveland Indians in 1949 were landmark moves that brought top black players to the major league teams. By 1960, only four Negro teams existed and the League folded. Some of the great players included: Ernie Banks, Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, Roy Campanella and James Thomas ("Cool Papa") Bell. In 1974, on the same day as Whitey Ford and Mickey Mantle, James Thomas Bell was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Prior to the performance, were you aware that there was a time in our country's history when African Americans could not play in major league baseball?
- Discuss some of the challenges that black ballplayers faced in the 1920's-1940's. How were their experiences different from those of black ballplayers today?
- Do you think that working as a baseball player was a good job for James Thomas Bell?
- What does the term "shadow ball" mean?
- How did Rochel Coleman use his body and voice during the performance to convey the actions of a real baseball game?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - MATHEMATICS:

Identify the geometric shapes one would find on a baseball field (diamond - infield; circle - pitcher's mound; square - bases; rectangle - dug-out.)

Figure out a player's batting average by dividing the number of "hits" (single, double, triple, home run) by the number of "at bats." A walk or "base on balls" is not counted as a hit.

Example: 180 hits
 ÷467 at bats
 =.385 average

Compute a pitcher's ERA or "earned run average." Earned run average is the average number of earned runs scored on a pitcher per game. It is calculated by taking the number of earned runs scored on a pitcher (excluding men on base as a result of errors), and dividing it by one-ninth, the total number of innings pitched.

$$\text{ERA} = \text{Earned runs}/(\text{innings pitched}/9)$$

- Legend:
- ⊗ Artistic perception
 - ❖ Creative expression
 - ▮ Historical & cultural context
 - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
 - * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ❖ Use pantomime and creative movement to create a "shadow ball" routine with fielding, batting and pitching elements.
- ⊗ Music from different eras is used in the performance of Shadow Ball to convey a sense of the time periods. Listen to recordings that were popular during the 1920's to the 1940's, from the Jazz Age (1920's), the Depression (1930's) and World War II (1940's).
- ▮ Role-play a scene in which a Negro Leagues' team comes in contact with Jim Crow segregation laws. Possible settings: a hotel, a restaurant, a store.
- ❖ Write a radio broadcaster's play-by-play description of part of a baseball game using some of baseball's unique vocabulary:

Can of Corn - a fly ball that can be easily caught.

Chin Music - a ball pitched close to a batter's chin.

Ducks on the Pond - runners on the base.

Lumber - a bat.

Tweener - a ball hit between two outfielders.

Shoestring Catch - a catch made by an outfielder just before the ball touches the ground.

- ⇒* *Shadow Ball* reveals the struggles that players like James Thomas Bell endured during the course of their careers. Describe the scenes in the play that were turning points for him. Make a connection between "Cool Papa" Bell's experiences in the play and challenges you may have faced in your life. Write about the meanings or lessons learned from the theatrical presentation.



SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

McKissack, Patricia C. and Fredrick, Jr., *Black Diamond*. Scholastic Inc., New York, New York: 1994.

Peterson, Robert W., *Only the Ball Was White*. Prentice Hall, Inc., New Jersey: 1970.