

Arden Theatre Company Presents

FALSETTOS



Teacher Resource Guide

Dear Teachers and Students,

Thank you so much for joining us for our production of *Falsettos* with Music and Lyrics by William Finn, book by William Finn and James Lapine, and directed by Kevin Glaccum.

In the following pages, you will find a collection of resources, discussion questions, activities, ideas, etc. related to our production of *Falsettos*. Feel free to pick and choose the materials that best help you and your students engage with the show.

We can't wait to have you here at the Arden again!



Content Advisory

Please note that this production features moderate profanity, depictions of implied romantic encounters, and simulated violence. *Falsettos* also includes complex and potentially difficult themes, including HIV/AIDS, death, and loss. This production also includes atmospheric haze and occasional usage of faster color-changing lights.

Please note that this Resource Guide contains descriptions of HIV/AIDS, death, and loss.

If you have any further questions about the content of this production or the information found in this guide, please contact our Education Staff at 215-922-8900 x162.



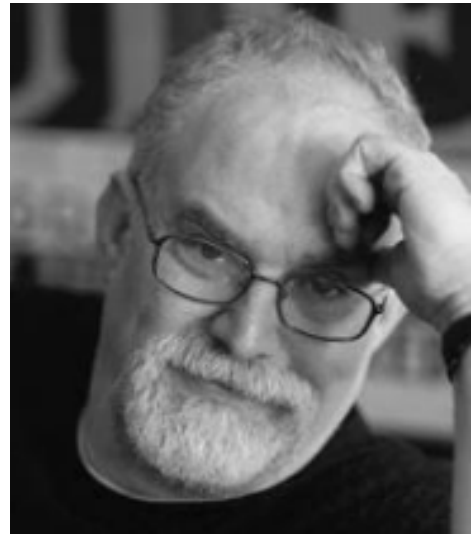
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FALSETTOS

About the creator: William Finn

William Finn (1952-2025) was the writer and composer of *Falsettos*, for which he received two Tony Awards, Best Book of a Musical (with James Lapine) and Best Original Score. He also wrote and composed *In Trousers*, *March of the Falsettos*, and *Falsettoland* (Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Musical, two Los Angeles Drama Critics Awards, two Drama Desk Awards, the Lucille Lortel Award and Guggenheim Fellowship in Playwriting.)



His other projects include *Little Miss Sunshine* (book by James Lapine; La Jolla Playhouse, Playwrights Horizon); *Elegies, A Song Cycle* (Lincoln Center Theater); and *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, which took New York by storm, winning two Tony Awards and running for more than 1,000 performances on Broadway. *Spelling Bee* has been produced nationally and internationally and is currently one of the most performed musicals in the United States according to Theatre Communications Group.

In addition to his work as a writer, he was the Artistic Producer of the Barrington Stage Company's acclaimed Musical Theater Lab, a program dedicated to mentoring emerging writers and developing new musicals. He was also on the faculty of New York University's Graduate Musical Theatre Writing Program.

About the writer: James Lapine

James Lapine (born 1949) is a stage director, playwright, screenwriter, and librettist. He wrote the book for *Falsettos*. He has worked with Stephen Sondheim on *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, and *Passion*. He also directed *Merrily We Roll Along* for Encores, and *Sondheim on Sondheim* for the Roundabout Theatre Company.



With William Finn, he has worked on *Falsettos*, *A New Brain*, *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* and *Little Miss Sunshine*. Other Broadway credits include: *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Golden Child*, and *Amour*. He has written the plays *Table Settings*, *Twelve Dreams*, *Luck, Pluck & Virtue*, *The Moment When*, *Fran's Bed*, and *Mrs. Miller Does Her Thing*. He has also directed many films and written screenplays, most notably Disney's *Into the Woods*.

He has received 11 Tony nominations, winning 3 times. He has also won 5 Drama Desk Awards and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *Sunday in the Park with George*. He was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 2011, and in 2020 he received the Drama League Award for Distinguished Achievement in Musical Theatre.

Meet the Actors



Ari Axelrod *he/him*
(Mendel)



Joey Caroto *he/him*
(Jason)



Will Stephan Connell *he/him*
(Whizzer)



Katherine Fried *she/her*
(Trina)



Jessica Johnson *she/her*
(Dr. Charlotte)



Jessica Money *she/her*
(Cordelia)



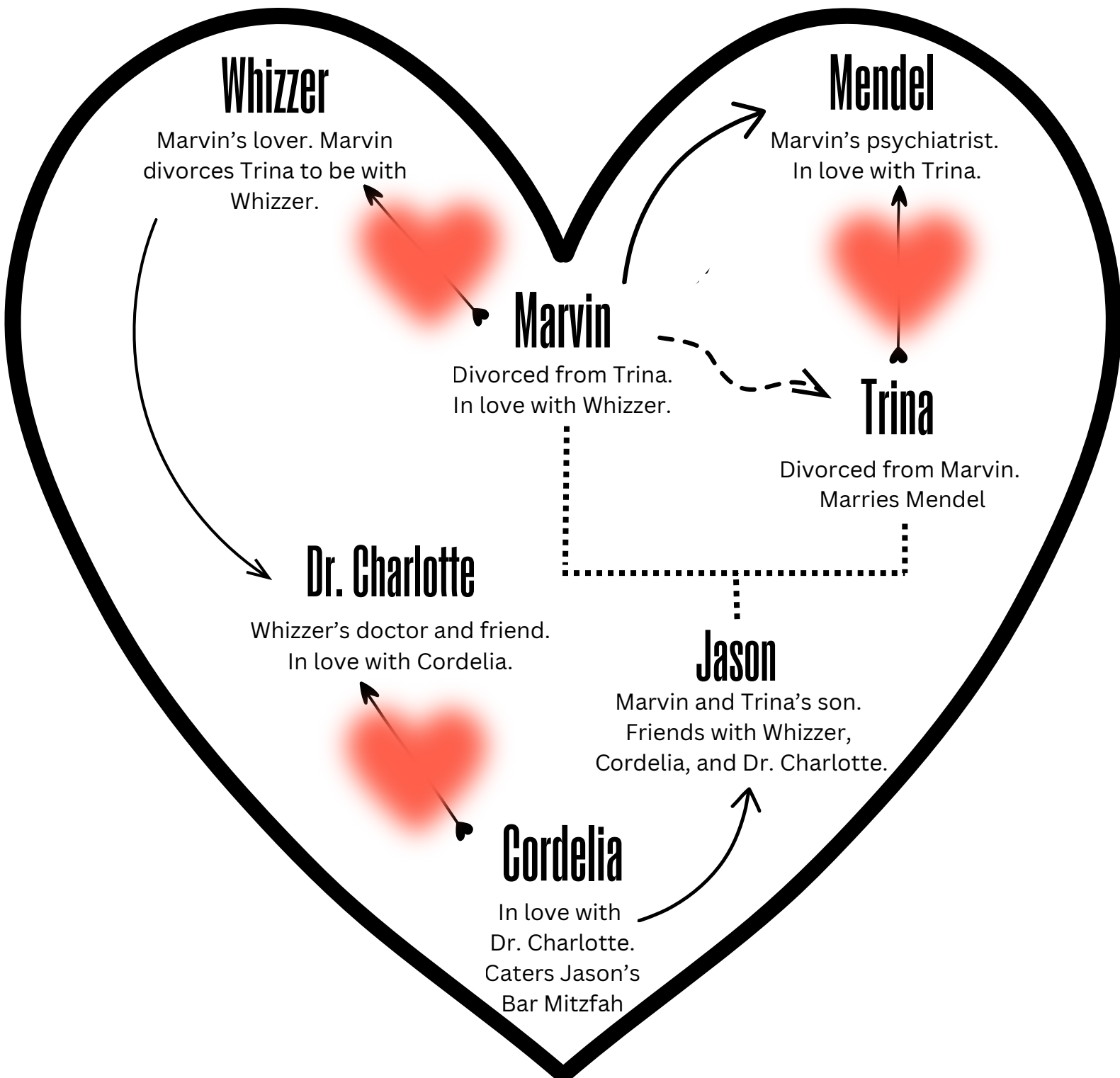
Steve Pacek *he/him*
(Marvin)

Understudies

**Paige Cheatham (Cordelia), Asia Deshields (Dr. Charlotte), Thomas Flannelly (Jason),
Michael Eddy Harvey (Marvin), Peter Hoefler (Whizzer), Samantha Ricchiuti (Trina),
Richie Sklar (Mendel)**

Character Map

FALSETTOS



Show Synopsis

FALSETTOS

Below is a synopsis of the plot of *Falsettos*. If you'd like to avoid spoilers, please skip this page!

Set in New York City in 1979 (Act 1) and 1981 (Act 2), *Falsettos* focuses on Marvin and the people in his life. Marvin has recently divorced his wife, Trina, and left her and their son, Jason, to live with his male lover, Whizzer. Marvin dreams of having a tight-knit family, but he's having trouble actualizing this aspiration. Told through a series of rapid fire vignettes, we see all the characters reflecting on the changes that are happening in and around themselves.

Marvin sees his psychiatrist, Mendel, in order to work through his turbulent on again/off again relationship with Whizzer and the estrangement he feels from Jason. Trina sees Mendel to discuss her failed marriage. Jason sees Mendel to discuss his parents' dysfunctional relationship (and to persuade Mendel to marry Trina, which Mendel eventually does.)

Act 2 begins four years later, and finds a more grown up Jason planning for his Bar Mitzvah and Whizzer starting to display odd symptoms. Planning for a Bar Mitzvah means that Marvin and Trina must reconcile their differences, and Jason must try and figure out who he wants to invite. With the help of Charlotte and Cordelia, Marvin's lesbian neighbors, plans for the Bar Mitzvah start coming together. However, when Whizzer collapses from an unknown illness that keeps getting worse, everyone must band together as a family.

History of *Falsettos*

Falsettos is a **sung-through musical**, which is a format similar to opera in that the story is **mostly told through music and lyrics** with little spoken dialogue.

The musical combines two one-act musicals, ***March of the Falsettos*** and ***Falsettoland***, the last two in a trio of one-act musicals (the first being ***In Trousers***.) All three of those one-act musicals center around Marvin's life.

March of the Falsettos, a one act musical about a gay man trying to harmonize his wife, son, lover and psychiatrist, opened on May 20, 1981 off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons in New York City.

Falsettoland, about the same family preparing for the son's Bar Mitzvah and thrown into turmoil with the onset of a mysterious disease, opened at Playwrights Horizons on June 28, 1990.

The two shows were combined to create ***Falsettos***, which opened on Broadway at the John Golden Theatre on April 29, 1992 where it ran for 486 performances,

The original Broadway production was **nominated for seven Tony awards**, including Best Musical, and won two: Best Book of a Musical (William Finn and James Lapine) and Best Original Score (Music & Lyrics by William Finn).

Historical Figures in *Falsettos*

Ronald Reagan: the 40th President of the United States (1981–89). Prior to that, he was the 33rd Governor of California (1967–75) and a radio, film, and television actor. Reagan was known for his extreme Conservatism, in both politics and social views, and his refusal to address AIDS directly in the early years of the epidemic.

Nancy Reagan: President Reagan's wife, a former actress, who was known for her fondness for fashion, glamour and her anti-drug campaign, "Just Say No."

Carl Jung: a famous Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist. Jung proposed and developed the concepts of the extroverted and the introverted personality, archetypes, and the collective unconscious.

Sigmund Freud: an Austrian neurologist who became known as the founding father of psychoanalysis, an approach to understanding human behavior that involves examining the repressed thoughts, emotions, and motivations that shape the human personality.

Hank Greenberg: a premiere hitter for the Detroit Tigers (1930-1946) and the Pittsburgh Pirates (1946-1947), and the first Jewish superstar in American professional baseball.

Sandy Koufax: a left-handed pitcher for the Brooklyn/Los Angeles Dodgers (1955-1966) remembered as one of the outstanding Jewish athletes in American sports.

Source

Falsettos Glossary

Judaism: the religion of the Israelites of the Bible and the Jews of today, based on the teachings of the Torah.

Torah: the law and teachings on which Judaism is founded, as recorded in the first five books of the Bible.

Bar Mitzvah: the religious initiation ceremony of a Jewish boy who has reached the age of 13 and is considered ready to take part in religious customs reserved for adult males, such as saying certain prayers and reading from the Torah. Traditionally the boy will perform these prayers and read from the Torah at his local synagogue in the presence of friends and family. Following the synagogue portion, there is usually a big party and meal to celebrate.

Yiddish: a language used by Jews in Central and Eastern Europe that is still spoken in many countries today.



Source

Yiddish Words from *Falsettos*

Canadelach - Matzo balls.

Dreck - something cheap or trashy.



Matzo Ball Soup

Gefilte Fish - A Jewish dish made from a poached mixture of ground boned fish, such as carp, whitefish or pike, which is typically eaten as an appetizer.

Knish - A Jewish snack that consists of a filling covered with dough that is either baked, grilled, or deep fried.

Kosher - foods that conform to the requirements of Jewish law.

Rugelach - Jewish pastry.

Schmo - an ignorant or dull person.

Schpiel - a long speech or argument

Trayf - not kosher.

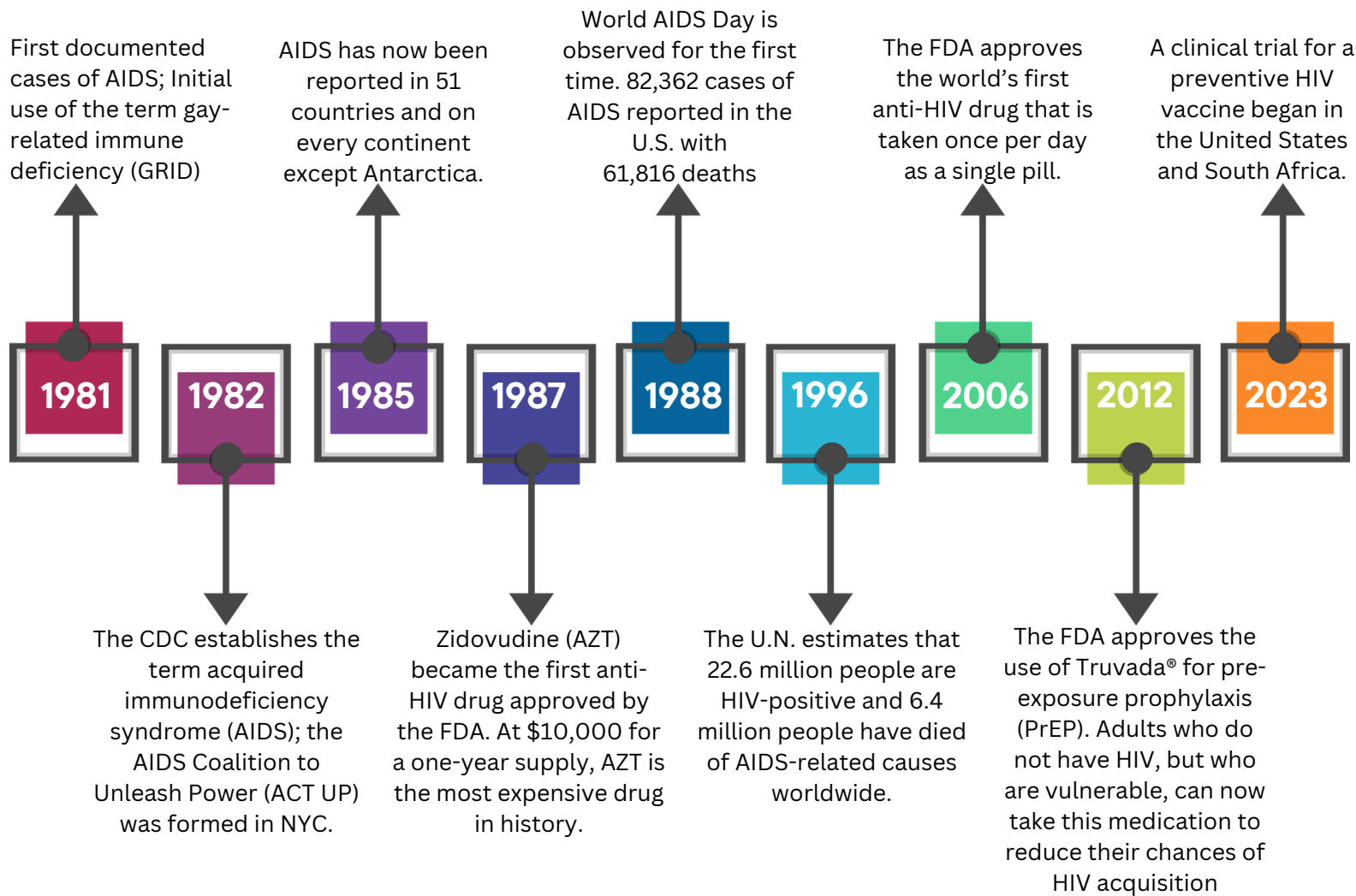
Tsouris - trouble and aggravation.



Rugelach

THE HIV/AIDS Epidemic: A brief historical background

Act 2 of *Falsettos* begins in 1981 when the first documented cases of AIDS were reported. Below is a timeline of the AIDS crisis following the events of the show.



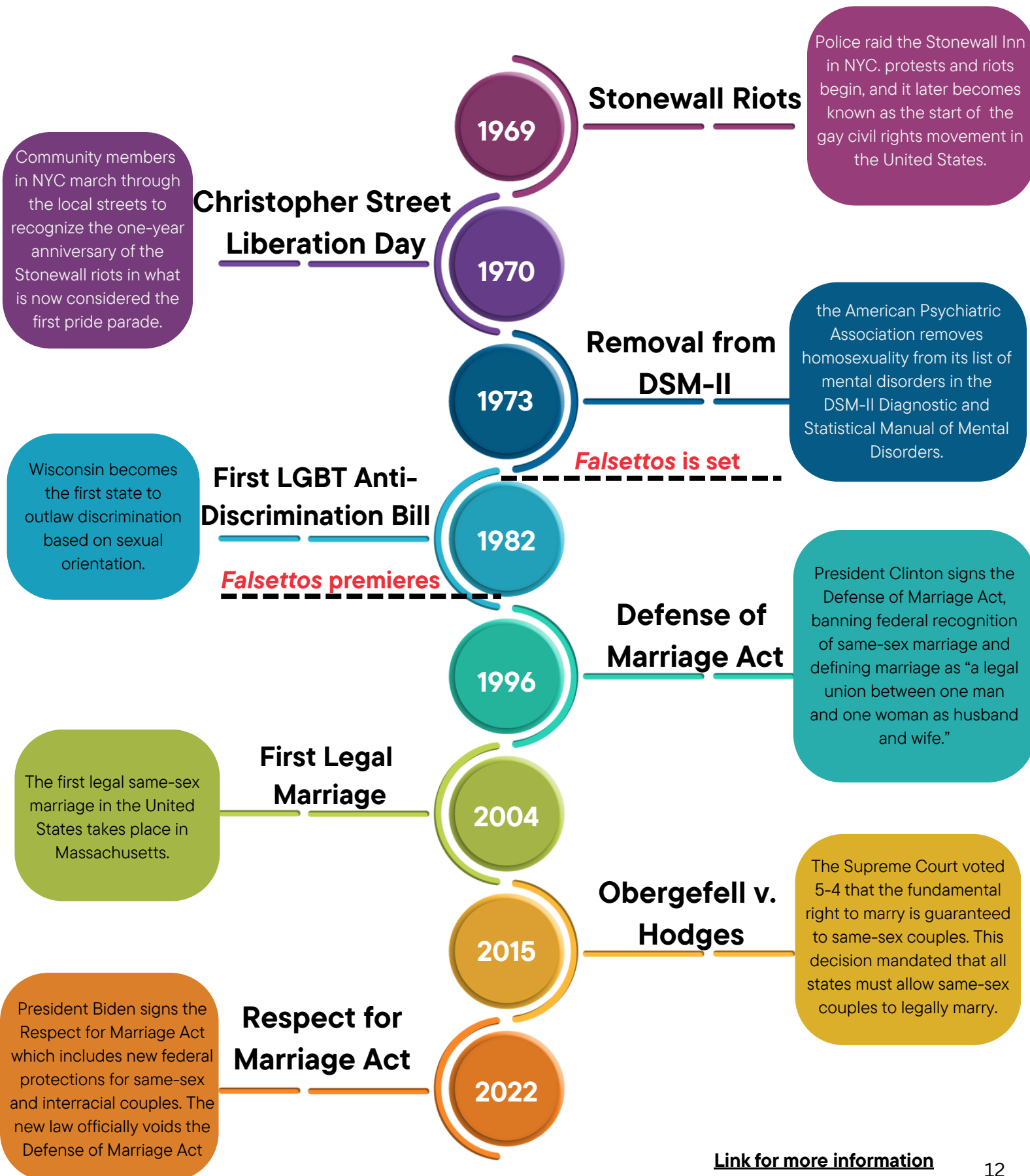
HIV/AIDS Timeline

The New York City AIDS Memorial's HIV/AIDS Timeline recounts the history of the epidemic and its impact locally, nationally, and globally.

New York City AIDS Memorial

Timeline of LGBTQ+ Civil Rights

Falsettos premiered in 1992 and is set in 1979 and 1981, before many LGBTQ+ Civil Rights were enacted. This would have impacted the characters' lives in the show.



Discussion Questions

1. *Falsettos* is set in New York City between 1979-1981. What were some of the designs (costumes, props, etc.) that helped connect you to the years the musical is set? How did the designs change from Act 1 (1979) to Act 2 (1981?)
2. The set designer for the Arden's production of *Falsettos* chose to make the set an outline of a house. Why do you think they chose to do that? What could it symbolize?
3. Marvin wants to have a "tight-knit family" where everyone accepts each other. How do the other characters in *Falsettos* define what a family is? How do you define family in your life?
4. What do you think the idea of a typical modern family was in the years in which *Falsettos* is set (1979-1981)? What does a modern family look like today? How do the characters and relationships in *Falsettos* fit that image?
5. What are some of the different love stories explored in *Falsettos*, and the different views about love that are expressed by the characters?



Discussion Questions

6. How does Whizzer's illness change Marvin? How does it change the other characters? How does it change Whizzer?
7. How is the metaphor of "the game" and "game playing" illustrated in *Falsettos*? What are some of the different games, both literal and figurative, that the characters play with each other throughout the musical?
8. There is very little dialogue in *Falsettos*: most of the show is sung through and sometimes giant passages of time are covered in one number. Why do you think the show creators chose to do this? How does music change the way the story is told?
9. Trina sings "I was sure growing up I would live the life my mother assumed I'd live." What are the assumptions, wishes, and pressures that our parents place on us? When do we start making decisions on our own and living the lives we want to lead?
10. In Act 2, two new characters, Cordelia and Dr. Charlotte, joined the cast. Why do you think the show creators included these two characters? What did they add to the story?



Classroom Activity: Evolution of a Musical

The musical *Falsettos* began as three different musicals following Marvin's journey, but that wasn't the show creators' original plan.

In this activity, students will create their own ideas for a musical that begins as three separate stories and then combines into one, similar to *Falsettos*.

Divide into groups of 3. All students in the group will choose a central character and setting for their group's musical together. They will then separately create their own one sentence summary of a musical featuring that character. When each student has created their summary, they will come back together as a group to discuss how each of their stories can work together in a full show.

Step 1: Divide the class into groups of 3. As a group, students will create their central character and decide a setting for their musicals.

Example:

Central character: Claire, a 30-year-old bookstore owner

Setting: A quiet beach town in present day (2025)

Decide the following as a group:

Central Character Name and Description

Setting (Time and Place)

Classroom Activity: Evolution of a Musical

Step 2: Working separately, each group member will now create a one to two sentence idea or pitch for their musical featuring the central character.

Person 1 will write their idea for Act 1, Person 2 will write their idea for Act 2, and Person 3 will write theirs for Act 3.

This can be done by cutting the following page into 3 sections and having each student fill out one section for each act, or by covering up each section as each student writes their idea. The goal is that each group member only knows the act that they wrote and can't see the other group members' ideas until the end!

Example:

Act 1: Claire's bookstore faces financial difficulties in competition with bigger companies, and she is forced to close her store!

Act 2: Claire creates a mobile bookstore/restaurant using a food truck owned by her friend.

Act 3: The beach loves the bookstore so much that they create a book festival and national holiday!



Classroom Activity: Evolution of a Musical

Use this page for Step 2

ACT 1

ACT 2

ACT 3

Classroom Activity: Evolution of a Musical

Step 3: After all three acts have been written, the group members will meet to share their ideas, decide a title for their new musical, and discuss how the three acts can successfully combine to create one cohesive story.

What's the title of your new musical?

How can you combine all 3 acts into one story?

Thank You For Joining Us!

FALSETTOS

An abstract graphic featuring several thick, curved lines in yellow, blue, red, and dark blue. These lines swirl and overlap in a dynamic, organic pattern, resembling a stylized heart or a complex knot. The background is a gradient of red, transitioning from a darker shade at the top to a lighter shade at the bottom.

Enjoy the show!