



TheatreWorks **50**
SILICON VALLEY

2019 REGIONAL THEATRE TONY AWARD®

*They Promised Her
the Moon*



IN THIS GUIDE

BEFORE THE MATINEE

Workshop Preparation Materials **2**

Student Matinee Details **3**

TEXT: The play on the page

Synopsis **4**

Characters **5**

Story Structure:
Non-Linear Storytelling **6**

CONTEXT: The world of the play

Playwright Laurel Ollstein **7**

Timeline of Events in the Play **8**

Women in Early Aviation **9**

The Cold War and the Space Race **10**

The Mercury 13 **11**

SUBTEXT: Ideas in the play

Finding Freedom **12**

Gender Equality **13**

Perseverance **14**

Further Reading **15**

Our Partners in Education **16**

FOR YOUR PRE-SHOW WORKSHOP

The goal of the pre-show workshop is to support you in connecting *They Promised Her the Moon* to the work you're doing in your classroom.

In this workshop, we will discuss the show in its historical context, exploring the ways in which Jerrie Cobb's experiences fit into the larger events going on in the United States in the early 1960s.

Here are some important things to know:

- *They Promised Her the Moon* is the true story of Geraldyn "Jerrie" Cobb, a brilliant, formidable, and daring pilot who was part of the Mercury 13, a select group of women aviators who underwent the same tests as men who were preparing to go into space. These men, the Mercury 7, as they were known, eventually made it to the moon, while the women who took the same physical and psychological tests as the men—and surpassed them in results, in many cases—were denied that opportunity.
- The play is performed by an ensemble of actors, several of whom play multiple roles.
- The events presented in this play are not told in chronological order.
- In playwright Laurel Ollstein's words, "Some of the characters and scenes are fictionalized, but the congressmen and reporters in the play are absolutely true."

Click on the image to see TheatreWorks' *They Promised Her the Moon* teaser video:



STUDENT MATINEE DETAILS

The student matinee performance of *They Promised Her the Moon* will be held on **Thursday, March 26 at 11:00 am, at the Lucie Stern Theatre** in Palo Alto.

The expected runtime is approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes, including one intermission.

Join us for the **20-minute post-show discussion** where a panel of individuals who work at NASA with Blue Marble Space Institute of Science will be in conversation with the audience regarding careers in space science.

THEATRE ETIQUETTE

If your students are new to live performances, here's what they need to know about how we behave:

- **We do not talk during the performance.** Actors can hear you. It's not like watching a film or TV.
- **We are free to laugh, gasp, or otherwise respond to the action onstage.** Actors are working with you—reactions are welcome.
- **We do not use cell phones.** Screens are distracting to actors and audience members. Turn your phone off and put it away.
- **We do not bring food or drink in the theatre.** Only water is allowed.
- **Q&A: Please ask questions prepared or on the spot.** If you have a lingering question that wasn't answered during the discussion, please email education@theatreworks.org. We would love to find you the answer!



SYNOPSIS

As the play opens, 29-year-old aviatrix Jerrie Cobb is about to undergo testing in an isolation tank, seeking to prove that she is physically and mentally fit to undergo the rigors of space travel. Dr. Lovelace, who is administering the test, warns Jerrie that even the highest performing male astronauts lasted less than four hours, experiencing anxiety and hallucinations. Jackie Cochran, financial backer of the tests and a superstar pilot in her own right, advises Jerrie that the future of the program rests squarely on her shoulders.

To everyone's surprise, Jerrie is completely at ease in the isolation tank. As she floats, we see Jerrie relive formative moments from her childhood, from a tongue-tied girl dreaming of flight to one of the most distinguished female pilots the world had ever seen, illuminating the path that brought her to this moment. Jerrie lasts an incredible nine hours in the tank before Jackie and Dr. Lovelace finally remove her.

Act Two opens with a press conference, touting Jerrie's spectacular performance and calling her the first woman astronaut. Suddenly Jerrie is a celebrity, subject to both adoration and condescension from the media, the public, even the people she loves. Then, without warning, the Women in Space program is cancelled—the navy is unwilling to grant Dr. Lovelace access to the equipment necessary to finish testing. It seems that despite all their efforts, NASA never intended to welcome women into the space program. Though Jerrie is called upon to speak before a congressional hearing, her words are no match for the institutional prejudices that hold women down.

Her dreams of space travel now dashed, Jerrie is forced to find another way to utilize her talents, and to realize her dreams of flight.



CHARACTERS

They Promised Her The Moon is based on the true story of Geraldyn “Jerrie” Cobb and the Mercury 13. Some of the characters and scenes are fictionalized, but the reporters and the congressman are absolutely true.

JERRIE COBB: World record holding pilot and *almost* the first woman in space.

JACKIE COCHRAN: A pioneer of American aviation, considered to be one of the most gifted racing pilots of her generation. Twenty years older than Jerrie.

DR. RANDY LOVELACE: Chairman of the Special Committee on the Life Sciences for Project Mercury, the U.S. Astronaut program.

HELENA COBB: Jerrie’s mother.

HARVEY COBB: Jerrie’s father.

JACK FORD: A pilot and owner of Fleetway International.

MRS. WHITE: Jerrie’s first grade teacher in Oklahoma.

CONGRESSMAN ANFUSO: A New York Congressman.

JOHN GLENN: One of the Mercury 7 astronauts.

MAYOR: A small town politician.

CIRCUS BOB: An owner of a rural Oklahoma circus.

CONGRESSMAN WAGGONER: A Southern Congressman.

CARLOS: An air traffic controller in the Amazon Jungle.

VARIOUS REPORTERS

Connections for Teachers and Students

- In this play, some actors play more than one role. What are some of the characteristics—both internal and external—that an actor might adjust to portray multiple characters?
- Most of the named characters in the play are real, historical figures. After you’ve seen the play, research one of the following people, and write a short essay about the events of the play from their point of view:

Jacqueline (Jackie) Cochran

Dr. William Randall (Randy) Lovelace II



Jackie Cochran, Dr. William Randall Lovelace, and John Glenn are among the real-life characters in *They Promised Her the Moon*.

STORY STRUCTURE: NON-LINEAR STORYTELLING

Many stories—from books, movies, television shows—are told in a linear fashion. There is a definitive beginning, middle, and end. We are introduced to the protagonist at the top of the story, receiving details about their lives, their desires, their hopes, and a problem that will drive the story forward. In the middle, the protagonist must face this problem. Whether they overcome it tends to provide the primary tension of the story. The action comes to a tipping point, and finally, at the end, we are brought to a conclusion. It is not always a happy, neat, or perhaps even satisfying conclusion, but one that brings the story to an end.

Non-linear storytelling, on the other hand, means that the events of the story do not unfold in chronological order. We may begin at the end of the story and move backwards from there. We may start *in media res*, meaning quite literally “into the middle of things.” We may jump around so frequently that it is hard to keep track of where exactly we are in the story. Non-linear storytelling challenges the viewer (or the reader) to pay close attention to the smallest of details, creating a sense of tension on the part of the audience, especially when we know what events will unfold for a particular character before they do.

They Promised Her the Moon is an example of non-linear storytelling. Throughout Act One, Jerrie goes back and forth between the present moment, where she floats in an isolation tank, and her memories. During Act Two, Jerrie gets distracted in the present by people from her past entering her imagination.

Connections for Teachers and Students

- Can you think of other examples from media (books, television, film) that employ non-linear structure?
- After the performance, discuss how the actors and design elements in the play signaled to the audience that a shift in time and place had occurred. How did you know when you were leaving the present moment and entering one of Jerrie’s memories, or seeing something that was in her imagination?



Sarah Mitchell / Image Erin Gould

Throughout the first act, the action of the play oscillates between the present moment, where Jerrie floats in an isolation tank, and formative moments from her past.

PLAYWRIGHT LAUREL OLLSTEIN

Los Angeles-based theatre artist Laurel Ollstein began her career as an actor before turning her talents to directing, writing, and teaching. She is a founding member of Tim Robbins' Actor's Gang, and she performed her award-winning one-woman show, *Laughter, Hope and a Sock in the Eye*, all over the country. Ollstein's résumé boasts a bevy of produced plays, both New York and Los Angeles directing credits, and teaching engagements with nearly half a dozen universities including UCLA and the University of Oklahoma.

It was at the University of Oklahoma that Ollstein first penned *They Promised Her the Moon*. As a 2012 Faith Broome Playwright-in-Residence she developed and taught undergraduate courses, all while producing her own original work. Inspired by the shuttering of NASA's Space Shuttle program, Ollstein was moved to write about someone who had given their all to be astronaut, only to have the program cancelled:

I started writing a short story about a woman astronaut at that point in her life. I didn't know enough about female astronauts, so I googled it, totally expecting to have Sally Ride's name pop up. But Jerrie Cobb's name came up instead.

Further reading convinced Ollstein that Jerrie Cobb's story needed to be told, and that she needed to tell it. Following her residency Ollstein continued to develop the piece, and in 2017 *They Promised Her the Moon* had a showcase production Off-Broadway.

In 2018, *They Promised Her the Moon* was presented at both the Powers New Voices Festival at San Diego's Old Globe theatre and at TheatreWorks' New Works Festival. The show was a hit at both festivals, and both theatres made plans to produce the work. The Old Globe staged the show's West Coast premiere in the spring of 2019, making TheatreWorks' production the Northern California premiere. Ollstein has continued to fine-tune the script in the interim, elevating the play with every draft, shooting ever closer to the stars.

Connections for Teachers and Students

- Write a letter to Laurel Ollstein, or create a piece of art or music that reflects how Jerrie Cobb's story has impacted you.

Teachers, please email your students' work to us and we'll see that it gets forwarded to Laurel.

Email: education@theatreworks.org

Mail: PO Box 50458, Palo Alto, CA 94303



HISTORICAL EVENTS

Amelia Earhart disappears.

Russia launches the **Sputnik** satellite, kicking off a decades-long space race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

The U.S. announces its first manned spaceflight program, Project Mercury.

After months of testing the first seven astronauts (the Mercury 7) are named.

The Soviet Union puts the first human, cosmonaut **Yuri Gagarin**, into orbit. Shortly after, the U.S. launches its first astronaut, **Alan Shepard**.

Astronaut **John Glenn** becomes the first American to orbit the earth.

Soviet cosmonaut **Valentina Tereshkova** becomes the first woman to fly in space.

Apollo 11 becomes the first manned mission to land on the Moon.

NASA selects its first female astronaut candidates. Among them is **Sally Ride**, who becomes the first American woman in space in 1983.

At age 77, **John Glenn returns to space** on the Space Shuttle Discovery to study the effects of spaceflight on older individuals. He becomes the oldest person to fly in space.

Eileen Collins becomes the **first woman commander** of an American space mission, commanding space shuttle *Columbia*.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS IN THE PLAY

1931 → **Jerrie Cobb** born in Oklahoma.

← 1937

1938 → **Jackie Cochran** wins the Bendix race and sets transcontinental speed records.

1942 → Cochran begins a training program for women pilots that eventually leads to the creation of the **Women Airforce Service Pilots** program.

1953 → While working at an airport in Miami, Jerrie meets **Jack Ford** and begins working for his company, ferrying aircraft worldwide.

← 1957

← 1958

← 1959

1960 → Jerrie goes to Albuquerque, NM, to be tested for spaceflight by **William "Randy" Lovelace**, who helped develop the readiness testing for the Mercury 7. She scores in the top 2% of all astronaut candidates. More women are recruited to take the tests, all privately financed by Jackie Cochran. **Thirteen of the women pass Phase I testing.** As they move forward with Phases II and III, **the program is canceled**, as it does not have official NASA support.

← 1961

← 1962 → Representative Victor Anfuso of New York convenes public **hearings before a special House Subcommittee** to discuss whether the qualifications for astronauts should exclude women. No action is taken as a result of the hearings.

← 1963

1965 → After working as a consultant for NASA for a brief time, **Jerrie leaves for the Amazon** to work as a humanitarian supply pilot.

← 1969

1973 → President Nixon awards Jerrie the Harmon Trophy, naming her **"the top woman pilot in the world."**

← 1978

← 1998 → Several organizations, including the National Organization for Women, begin a campaign to finally send Jerrie into space, following the precedent of John Glenn. Jerrie says **"I'd give my life to fly in space. I would have then, and I will now."** The campaign fails. Jerrie returns to the Amazon and continues her decades-long humanitarian work.

← 1999

WOMEN IN EARLY AVIATION

Before Jerrie Cobb and Jackie Cochran, many women had their eyes on the skies. They broke barriers, combated sexism, and for Bessie Coleman, the first African-American and Native American woman pilot, combated racism.



No one in her home state of Texas would teach her how to fly, so **Bessie Coleman** decided to go to France, the home of the prestigious Federation Aeronatique Internationale, to be trained. In the process, she became the first African-American and Native American woman to receive an international pilot's license. Coleman was an aviation pioneer, but because of her race and gender, she has been deliberately overlooked in the annals of history.

In the sidebar you'll find the names of three forgotten women in the history of aviation. **Click on their names** to find out more about their lives and accomplishments.

Connections for Teachers and Students

- History is riddled with stories of people who have been overlooked/maligned/misunderstood, but have risen above to succeed. Which historical (hidden) figures come to mind?



Bessie Coleman



Willa Brown



Hazel Ying Lee

THE COLD WAR

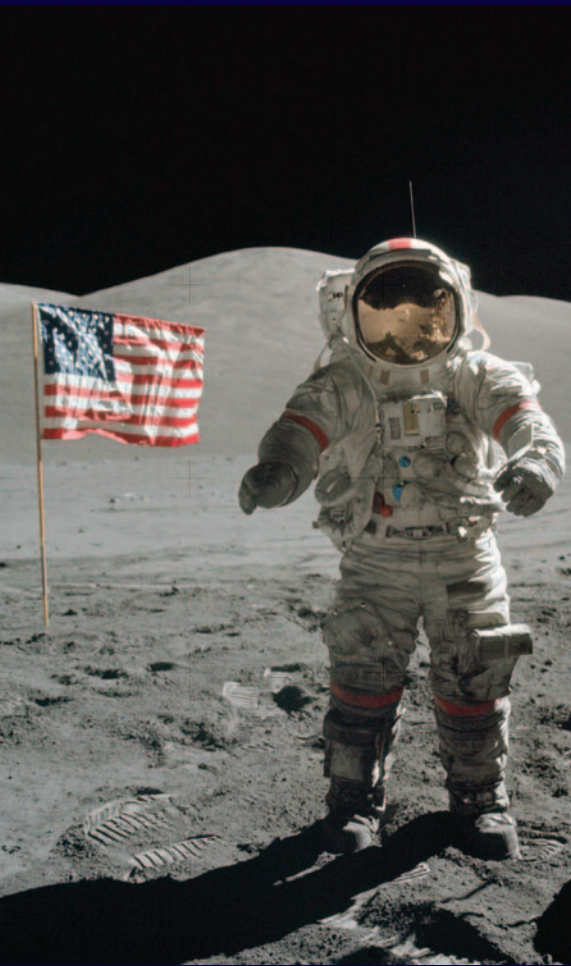
A “cold war” is one fought not through armed military conflict but through economic means, through threats, and propaganda. Cold wars have been waged throughout history and continue into the present.

Perhaps the most famous cold war was the one waged between the United States (the “Western bloc”) and the Soviet Union (the “Eastern bloc”) between the years 1947 and 1991. Often we think of this period of time as a war of ideology—a war between the capitalism of the U.S. and the communism of the Soviet Union. It was also largely geopolitical (politics that are related to geography) in nature, especially concerning the nuclear power of each nation. Both nations sought to instill a sense that they were so fundamentally different from one another as to be irreconcilable. This played itself out not just in politics, but in sports, media, and, eventually, in space—the so-called “final frontier.”

THE SPACE RACE

The “space race” is so called because it was an intense period from the late 1950s through to the 1980s where the space programs of each respective country attempted to one-up each other, not just in the spirit of science, but in the spirit of geopolitical domination. Such intense competition propelled each nation to make technological and scientific advancements at an astonishing rate. While the Soviet Union was the first to put a man in space, the U.S. became the first to bring a man to the moon. While the Soviet Union put a woman in space first, they have since only brought 3 other women through their cosmonaut program. The United States, by contrast, has sent 40 American women into space.

Today, the relationship between Russian cosmonauts and American astronauts is mostly congenial in nature. While tensions between the two nations still exist, the scientists who board the International Space Station (indeed one of the greatest feats of humanity) do so generously, in the hopes of inspiring others to continue space exploration.



When the U.S. first landed on the moon in 1969 the American flag was erected, a plan by NASA to indicate **“the first lunar landing as an historic forward step of all mankind, that has been accomplished by the United States.”**

THE MERCURY 13

They Promised Her the Moon is centered around the experiences of Jerrie Cobb, but there were in fact twelve other women who passed the same physical examinations that had been developed for NASA's astronaut selection process.

The members of the Mercury 13 included Jerrie Cobb, along with the twelve women pictured here.

Top row: Sarah Gorelick Ratley, Irene Leverton, Janet and Marion Dietrich, Wally Funk. Second row: Myrtle Cagle, Gene Stumbough Jessen, Rhea Woltman, Bernice Steadman, Jean Hixson, Jerri Sloan Truhill, Jane Briggs Hart.



Click on the image above to see the 2018 Netflix documentary about the Mercury 13.





Sarah Mitchell & Dan Hiatt
Photo Kevin Berne

FINDING FREEDOM

From the very first lines of *They Promised Her the Moon*, it is clear that Jerrie Cobb feels most free when she is in the sky. Read Jerrie's opening monologue below and consider how flying makes her feel, and why it's so important to her.

JERRIE

I'm running as fast as I can through the cornfield—the stalks taller than me. Ten feet maybe. Scratching my arms my face—I don't care—I have a good tailwind—and then in this dream I jump—and fly. Over the field, zoom past our house with mother standing at the back porch searching for me, of course she doesn't look up. I fly over the barn, the cows, school, church, Lake Thunderbird and fields and mountains and oceans.

I see the curvature of the earth.

The moon rises out of the sea.

Hear myself breathing.

The same air that angels breathe. I explode into the clouds. And—I—disappear.

I'm not lost. I just don't wish to be found.

(She laughs lightly)

The first time....

Even before we reached 300 feet, I knew that the sky would be my home. You knew, too.

"And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." Matthew 21:22

Connections for Teachers and Students

- In the play, who or what makes Jerrie feel trapped? How does flying help her escape?
- Write a narrative in which a character feels trapped, but finds freedom in something or someone.

GENDER EQUALITY

In *They Promised Her the Moon*, we see how sexism in the 1960s was a problem of both people's **mindsets** and the nation's **institutions**.

From childhood, Jerrie Cobb faced criticism from her mother for not being ladylike, her appearance and actions unlikely to attract a good husband. Even when she'd become a celebrity the media focused more on her looks than her accomplishments. John Glenn himself stated in a congressional hearing that **"The fact that women are not in this field is a fact of our social order."** Even so, women like Jerrie and the rest of the Mercury 13 were ready to buck social convention and prove that a woman's place is anywhere in the universe she dares to go.

But while talent and perseverance can get you far, sometimes there are real, insurmountable barriers put in place to keep members of certain groups from attaining their dreams. In Jerrie's case, she could not become an astronaut because all candidates were required to have graduated from military jet test piloting programs. At the time, women were not allowed into those military programs, and so there was no way for any woman to meet NASA's qualifications.

Jerrie pled her case before a congressional hearing in 1962, arguing against discrimination on the basis of sex in the space program. Unfortunately for her, the Civil Rights Act was still two years away—it wasn't until 1964 that sex discrimination actually became illegal.

Connections for Teachers and Students

- The play, and thus the discrimination Jerrie Cobb faced, took place in the 1960s. How far have we come in the past 60 years? Think about women in politics, STEM careers, professional sports, even Hollywood. Do you think our society has evolved past gender discrimination? Why or why not?



Dan Hiatt, Anthony Fusco, Sarah Mitchell,
& Stacy Ross / Photo Kevin Berne

**You can't ever
forget you're a
woman—cause
they won't.**

*-Jackie Cochran, in
They Promised Her the Moon*

PERSEVERENCE

Throughout *They Promised Her the Moon*, Jerrie Cobb's dreams of flight are hindered by everyone from her own mother to the United States government. Even in the face of so much pressure to conform, to give up her dreams, to live the life that a nice, Christian girl is "supposed" to live, Jerrie follows her dreams.

Though she may not make it to the moon, Jerrie succeeds in crafting a life for herself that allows her to remain aloft, employing her unique talent and satisfying her own desire to fly, to help others. Like so many exceptional women who came before and after, Jerrie's perseverance is what allows her to live the life of her dreams.

Connections for Teachers and Students

- What in your life are you passionate about? Create a vision board that features your passion (a hobby, career path, etc) and how you plan to pursue it. Here's how:
 1. Identify a passion of yours, and set a goal related to that passion.
 2. Collect a bunch of magazines, print advertisements, etc. that are full of colorful images. Cut out images that relate to your passion, and make a collage.
 3. Add motivational words to your collage that express how you want to feel. These may be cut from magazines as well, or hand-written by you.
 4. Post your vision board in your room somewhere where you'll see it daily. Take a few minutes each day to think about your goal, and what you need to do to achieve it.



Stacy Ross / Photo Kevin Berne

JACKIE

This time will be different,
Randy. I've learned a few
things.

DR. LOVELACE

God help us. What have
you learned?

JACKIE

I kept trying to
break through the
wall back then.
And now?
Now I go around.

FURTHER READING

Below are links to articles describing the accomplishments and pioneering efforts of women at NASA, as well as interviews. These women are astronauts, engineers, mathematicians, and they take on both administrative and technical roles at NASA. These women represent only a very small portion of the women who have worked at NASA, and who continue to work at NASA today. Also included are links to resources detailing careers in space science and aviation.

Google Arts and Culture: 15 Game-Changing Women of NASA

Women at NASA: A series of six videos from Women's History Month in 2019, wherein women at NASA describe their roles

VIDEO INTERVIEWS

Katherine Johnson: In remembrance

"Everything was so new—the whole idea of going into space was new and daring. There were no textbooks, so we had to write them."

Sally Ride: The first American woman and first known LGBT astronaut in space.

"I would like to be remembered as someone who was not afraid to do what she wanted to do, and as someone who took risks along the way in order to achieve her goals."

Dr. Mae Jemison: The first African-American woman in space.

"I am as much a part of this universe as any speck of star dust. I have a right to be here."

Dr. Linda Spilker: Lead project scientist for the Cassini-Huygens mission—the mission that sent a probe to Saturn to study its systems, its rings, and its natural satellites.

RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The Blue Marble Space Institute of Science

Women in Aviation International

Women@NASA

Sally Ride Science at UC San Diego



Katherine Johnson



Sally Ride



Mae Jemison

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of Carey & Josh Pickus
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This study guide was created by TheatreWorks staff members Katie Bartholomew, Katie Dai, Lisa Edsall Giglio, Ed.D., and Sophie Nelson and TheatreWorks intern Brennah Kemmerly for our 2020 production of *They Promised Her the Moon*, and includes resources shared by The Old Globe. For permission to reuse any part of this document, please contact education@theatreworks.org.