

# "Burial"

## Suggested Response Topics



1. The opening scene of the opera *Burial* is a 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration. Both Mayor Kimball and storekeeper Lee want to commemorate and honor the lives of 13 Chinese railroad workers from the late 1800s, whose century-old bones have recently been recovered in the area.
  - a. Compare the plans for commemoration presented by these two characters.
  - b. Why is Lee critical of the Mayor's plan?
  - c. If you were Mayor Kimball, what would you do to ensure a respectful burial for these workers? Would you consider incorporating elements of an American burial practice?
2. The operatic creative team (librettist & composer) used a theatrical technique of "flashback": the plot with Mayor Kimball and Lee is interrupted by a scene of a 125-year old conversation between a white railway owner and one of the Chinese workers.
  - a. An effective flashback demonstrates *conflict* through action instead of *telling* the audience about the conflict verbally. What did the flashback in *Burial* show you about the power disparity between the railroad managers and Chinese workers?
  - b. How does a flashback affect your response to the modern day burial? Did it unlock any important themes for you?
3. Discuss the importance, for your own response, of the fact that a Chinese singer was engaged to play the role of the Chinese worker.
4. What did you learn from this opera about the nature of work and life for the Chinese workers on the transcontinental railroad? What kind of physical work did they do? What dangers did they face?
5. How would you describe the style of the music, and how it works with the plot to communicate the story and its emotions? What musical choices express the tension and other emotions in the scenes?
6. In 1882, the US Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned Chinese laborers from entering the US. It wasn't until 1943 that the law was revoked, after President Roosevelt wrote a letter to Congress urging them to repeal the Chinese exclusion laws and "correct a historic mistake."
  - a. Do you think Mayor Kimball's ceremony is a meaningful honor, an empty gesture, or something in between?
  - b. Do you think she is avoiding the town's troubling past? Is she taking responsibility for the town's treatment of Chinese workers?
7. Decades after immigrating to the United States, Lee's mother still didn't feel truly at home. Lee says her mother "existed between two worlds" – simultaneously a respected member of the community and an outsider.
  - a. Have you ever felt uncomfortable in a new place? What made you feel like you belonged there, and what made you feel out of place?
  - b. What advice would you offer to your neighbors to help make your community more welcoming to newcomers, immigrants, and refugees?