

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

EVEN MORE THAN 60 YEARS AFTER THE FIRST ATOMIC TEST, the events depicted in *Doctor Atomic* remain extraordinarily timely. The decision to create, test, and ultimately use this new weapon caused tremendous conflict and uncertainty among the scientists and military personnel at the center of the story. The implications of the Trinity test continue to haunt us, and the moral issues about nuclear weaponry are still hotly debated.

Engage your students in a conversation about the issues at stake in *Doctor Atomic*. For example:

- Who was opposed to the bomb and why?
- What were the questions raised at Los Alamos based on what the scientists and government leaders seemed to know at the time?

Stage mock debates based on students' responses to the questions above. Have your students represent different sides of the argument, as if they were characters in the opera.

After the mock debate, look at the questions surrounding *Doctor Atomic* and discuss if and how they have been resolved.

- What are the major moral and philosophical questions raised by this momentous event in history? Ask students to describe how things have changed in the world since 1945. Do the issues raised in *Doctor Atomic* still affect us? What have we learned? Which of the questions are still relevant today?

The discussion may lead to a broad inquiry about science and its impact on society. Below are some questions to further the discussion.

- Can science be a neutral pursuit?
- Can it be detached from the moral implications of its results?
- What are other examples of scientific pursuits that raise these questions (e.g. cloning, stem cell research)?

Have your students bring in newspaper clippings on current events and explain how they connect to the world of *Doctor Atomic*.

Your students can explore the controversial themes of the opera as they are relevant today in the follow-up exercise to the Classroom Activity, *Oppenheimer's Voices* (page 17) and the Post-Show Discussion on page 36.