

LEARNING LINKS

**National
Circus and
Acrobats of
the People's
Republic of
China: *Peking
Dreams***

TUESDAY
SEPTEMBER 22 2015
9:30 AM & 11 AM
WEDNESDAY
SEPTEMBER 23 2015
9:30 AM & 11 AM

2015 > 2016

BROADEN THE HORIZONS
OF YOUR CLASSROOM.
EXPERIENCE THE VIBRANT
WORLD OF THE ARTS
AT THE McCALLUM!



McCallum Theatre Institute
Field Trip Series



McCALLUM THEATRE INSTITUTE
PRESENTS

National Circus and Acrobats of the People's Republic of China: *Peking Dreams*

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“You will hear
oohhs and ahhhs
throughout the show.”

Yao Jianguo • Director

Connecting to Curriculum and Students' Lives!

HISTORY & GEOGRAPHY • People's Republic of China

ARTS • Acrobatics

SCIENCE • The human body

IDEAS • Balance, strength, coordination

Expanding the Concept of Literacy

What is a “text”? We invite you to consider the performances on McCallum's Field Trip Series as non-print texts available for study and investigation by your students. Anyone who has shown a filmed version of a play in their classroom, used a website as companion to a textbook, or asked students to do online research already knows that “texts” don't begin and end with textbooks, novels, and reading packets. They extend to videos, websites, games, plays, concerts, dances, radio programs, and a number of other non-print texts that students and teachers engage with on a regular basis.

We know that when we expand our definition of texts to the variety of media that we use in our everyday lives, we broaden the materials and concepts we have at our disposal in the classroom, increase student engagement, and enrich learning experiences.

Please consider how utilizing your McCallum performance as a text might align to standards established for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language.

How do we help students to use these texts as a way of shaping ideas and understanding the world?

Please use this material to help you on this journey.

NON-PRINT TEXT • any medium/text that creates meaning through sound or images or both, such as symbols, words, songs, speeches, pictures, and illustrations not in traditional print form including those seen on computers, films, and in the environment.

The Work of Art

A Non-print Text for Study

- What's it made of? How can this work serve as a *Common Core State Standards*-mandated "text" for student study in the classroom?



There's something distinct and quite set apart in the experience of watching someone — let it be pianist or prize fighter — operating at the pinnacle of achievement. You know you are in the presence of something out of the ordinary. Among the many qualities on display are control, focus, a thorough knowledge of the art, and the ability to imagine what comes next. These qualities — and more! — pour forth in the performance of the National Acrobats of the People's Republic of China. Whether the athletes (or are they artists? or both?) dive and flip through giant hoops, lie on their backs juggling and then tossing (tossing!) benches from one pair of feet to another, or stack up fifteen bodies to a bicycle — there is a skill level throughout which modestly yet firmly asserts itself as world-class.

Performers of both genders — bodies tensile and movement precise — are clad in colorful garments that hint poetically of circus origins. (These are often the product of three months labor each — and the performers change five or six times in a typical performance.) Speaking of circuses, you've no doubt seen plate spinning before. Again, however, these Chinese artists raise the bar, deftly dispatching stunts of every stripe within the routine, neither breaking a sweat nor dropping a dish! Then there's the act in which, propped atop one another's shoulders, they juggle straw hats. Everyday items, bottles and ladders among them, are pressed into service throughout these vibrant hijinks. And have we mentioned contortionism? Martial arts? Drumming? Dancing? Yes, it's all — nail-bitingly — there.

Those of you who attended the company's most recent visit in 2014 to the McCallum will be interested to learn that this new work, *Peking Dreams*, involves combining forces from both the acrobatic wing and the circus wing of the outfit. The end result is a show like no other, in which history, extraordinary feats, highly developed ensemble skills, costuming of colorful vibrancy, and elaborate make up interweave to produce sheer magic.

The *Peking Dreams* program is comprised of the following:

OPENING

What better way to begin? A high degree of technical skill as well as a sure sense of how to set the tone and whet the appetite for things to come, characterizes this exciting start.

MASTER AND HIS PUPILS

The acrobatic master faces his new pupils. Who are they? Three children, who have chosen to embark on a course of training in the dimly-lit training room while just outside the windows and doors the moon paints the Peking courtyard silver.

LASSO

You know what a lasso is, right? Put one in the hands of a skilled Chinese circus acrobat – and just imagine what sorts of feats materialize!

TRAPEZE AND PLATES SPINNING

Surrounded by a bevy of blooms, the lovely lady who lives at the royal court in the Forbidden City gazes admiringly at the full moon and composes toasts. From her cup she drinks deep draughts of cool, nourishing, dairy-fresh milk. Encouraged by the milk's cheering effects, she proceeds to hang upside down on her trapeze. Far below, she glimpses the palace maidens raptly absorbed in a plate spinning act.

HOOP-DIVING

In any metropolis, there's great potential for feeling overwhelmed and even lonely. Lonely among so many people? Yet this is often the story of big cities. Beijing is among the biggest, of course. To succeed in such an environment, young people must really hustle. Pick up the pace. Break speed records. Increase productivity. Distinguish themselves. In an illustration of that contemporary spirit, the actors of Hoop-diving somersault backwards through multiple hoops while executing 360 degree twists.

AERIAL SILK

The boy is handsome and bold. The girl is beautiful and moves like a dream. Inevitably, friendship spills over into a deeper connection. This tender story of romance plays out on colorful lengths of silk dangling from high above the stage floor. The couple gazes deeply into each other's eyes while navigating their way through space.

FEET-JUGGLING WITH UMBRELLAS AND HOOLA HOOPS

Have you been to Beijing in the fall? Denizens will tell you the weather can turn on a dime, sunny some of the time, stormy at other times. What does this have to do with juggling umbrellas with your feet? Well, sometimes you're juggling umbrellas with your feet, and other times you're twirling hoops around the other girls – wet weather and sunny. See what we mean? If the weather can be flexible – and there is as much beauty in billowing clouds as in blue skies – so can the art of Chinese circus and acrobatics.

STRAW HATS JUGGLING

Big weddings are big weddings, whether performed today or, as in this vignette, in old Peking. The rich family marries off the daughter. The guests make merry. A comic vein runs throughout this traditional scene as straw hats see some lively action. Toasts are made, glasses lifted, wholesome, dairy-fresh milk drunk down to the last drop.

BICYCLE

From the genre of Chinese opera comes the theme explored in this next act. *The Generals of the Yang Family* is an old, treasured story from the Peking repertory. In this version, the women of the company outfit themselves as warriors and proceed to dazzle with the virtuosity of tricks they perform on their bikes.

HIGH CHAIRS

You've seen pictures of the Great Wall of China. Perhaps you've even been one of the ten million visitors to visit the site yearly. It is surely the greatest wonder ever created by the Chinese people, and if its stones could tell stories...what tales we should hear of dynasties rising and falling throughout the millennia! How to represent this phenomenon within the narrow compass of a theater stage? Why, stack the chairs high – and then execute breathtaking stunts at the summit.

FINALE

Like all well-considered finales, this one both sums things up while ratcheting up the level.

The Artists

Who has *produced* this text for study?

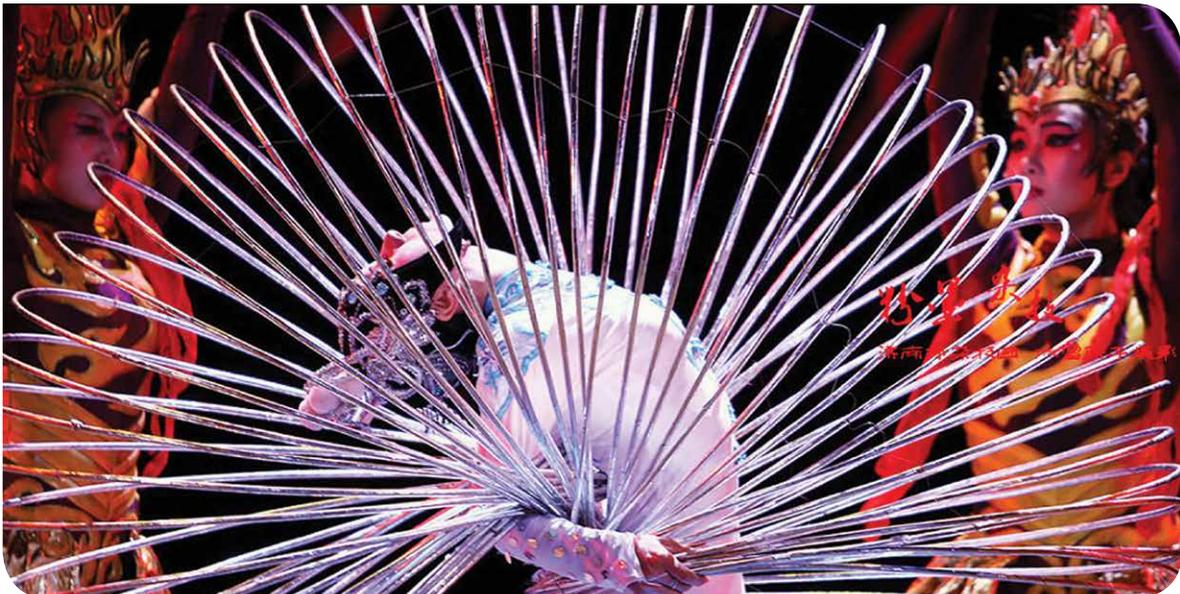
Want to be one of these elite athletes? It's not for the lazy or faint of heart. You get recruited at age six, seven, or eight by scouts who come to your school, looking for a particular set of aptitudes. If selected, you launch into six years, minimum, of arduous, intense training. That's assuming you pass the strict entrance exam which eliminates a full third of those who try.

It will interest you to know that the National Acrobats of the People's Republic of China was the first performing arts troupe established by the newly ascendant People's Republic of China in 1950. Since that time, the company has won world wide recognition and a slew of prizes. Tours have taken it to more than forty countries. In 2011, National Acrobats of the People's Republic of China made its inaugural visit to Canada and the United States – with a stop at the McCallum. This year, they're back!

The training side of things – that is, the Institution of Acrobatic Schooling, Training, and Repertoire, located in Beijing – boasts fifty-some resident acrobats as well as a student body numbering over five hundred. The performers themselves range in age from 17 to 22. Beyond the dedication required of these performers, each must merge him or herself into the collaborative. Together they form a family, in line with the Chinese ethos. No one gets star treatment! That doesn't seem to be a problem, however. Just look at those broad smiles as the gifted entertainers sail from one thrilling moment to the next.

“Seven minutes on stage is equal to ten years of training.”

Common saying in acrobatic training schools



Contexts

- What *information* surrounds this text for study & could help make students' engagement with it more powerful?



There is no final consensus on just when acrobatics first emerged in Chinese history. Some claim those initial forays occurred during the Warring States Period (475–221 B.C.), when working folks from the Hebei Province developed their acrobatic skills. Others point to historical records from deep in the distant past, to the Xia Dynasty 4,000 years ago, for evidence of the art form's earliest stirrings. In the 1950s, archaeologists unearthed stone engravings in the Shandong Province representing acrobatic performances – with musicians playing what must be assumed was a musical accompaniment. These engravings are over 2,000 years old. Anyway, you get the picture. Wherever one locates the moment Chinese athletes first tumbled, juggled, and balanced on each other's shoulders, or went walking on their hands, the practice of acrobatics and those who engaged in it have led the way in the cavalcade of Chinese culture ever since.

The Han Dynasty saw further refinements, and in the Tang Dynasty – an era of fertile cultural flowering – the art of the acrobat grew ever more elaborate and demanding. Increasingly, you saw images of these athletes in paintings, while poets paid their own form of homage in the literary arts.

Throughout much of this tumultuous history, acrobatic troupes were family-run affairs. Family secrets were guarded jealously. However, the rise of communism changed that. Across the spectrum, private enterprise became government run. This was not, as it turned out, bad news for acrobatics, which those in power proclaimed to be an “art for the people” – versus, for example, an elitist endeavor. Under the People's Republic, then, it has flourished.

“Not too fast, not too slow, you need to be patient and to follow the middle road to find success in your acrobatic skills.”

Common saying in acrobatic training schools

To get ready for the performance, students could research these:

- Acrobatics
- Chinese history & culture



Here's a 60 minute lesson* in collaboration & problem-solving you could teach to help prepare students for this work:

Line of Inquiry** How do the National Acrobats of the People's Republic of China, using precision of execution and finely-tuned collaboration, carry forward acrobatic tradition within the Chinese culture?

Begin a dialogue with students by asking: What do we know about acrobatics? What skills are needed? What personal qualities are needed? (For example, discipline, courage, patience) Write a list on the board.

Show this clip: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ib-n-JejQSE

As well as this one – www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8HHMvegWkI

Or even a portion of this much longer video – www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6UR25c8ByM

Have students describe what they saw. Show the video(s) a second time, encouraging students to look specifically for all the ways in which the acrobats collaborate. Afterwards ask: How do they?

Ask: Any qualities or skills we want to add to our list?

In table groups, students collaborate on writing a story about a young Chinese acrobat.* Start by having groups create an outline of the story. Then, have them problem-solve: what additional information (context) about the life of a young Chinese acrobat will they need to flesh out the story? Groups take a predetermined amount of time to research on Chromebooks or iPads – and a time frame is established for completing their story.

Each group then shares their story aloud with the class. What an ideal opportunity at this point for having students do a "close read" of this "text!"

Here's one way: After each group's reading aloud, ask questions of the listeners that require them to return in their minds to the text they've just heard in order to provide answers. A liberal sprinkling of open-ended questions – always connecting back to the heard text – can take the dialogue into higher level thinking.

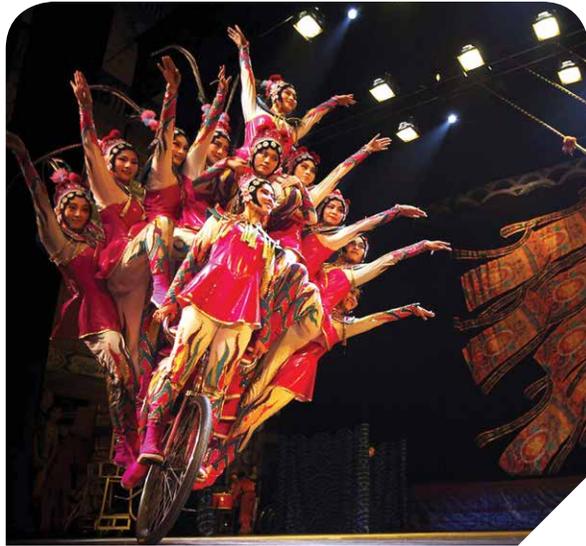
Each student then silently writes a short paragraph on the theme: What will I be looking for in the performance?

**In the case of Kindergarten and 1st Grade, perhaps writing becomes drawing and group work becomes the whole class?*

***A Line of Inquiry is an Essential Question that generates a lesson*

After coming to the theater, students could research these:

- People's Republic of China
- The National Circus and Acrobats of the People's Republic of China
- Forms of historical record (stone engravings, wall paintings, papyrus sheets, etc.)



Here's a 45-60 minute lesson you could teach after students have experienced the work:

DISCUSSION

Have students take a look back at the performance. What stood out, and why? Describe the movement. What were the different stunts — and how were they sequenced? What special skills were in evidence? What were the different groupings? How did the performers appear to communicate with each other? What evidence was there of collaboration? What emotions were conveyed — and how? What surprised you? What do you want to know more about?

TABLE GROUPS

Imagine you are that youngster in China about whom you wrote earlier. You want to be accepted to the Institution of Acrobatic Schooling, Training, and Repertoire, located in Beijing. Collaborating on language, together write a letter to the Admissions Officers, telling why you should be given a chance. What skills and natural abilities will "you" mention?

Read these aloud in the whole group. Lead a dialogue after each by asking: In which ways does this letter make an effective case for admittance? Which specific passages are evidence for this?

“We have had such wonderful audiences. Each audience gave us a standing ovation at the end of the show.”

Yao Jianguo • Director



What's *your* read of this non-print text?

How would you answer these questions — and how could they be adapted as Guiding Questions to spark student discussion?

- How would you describe the costumes? How did they appear to be made? What colors predominated? What did these costumes remind you of?
- What are some great adjectives for describing how the performers moved their bodies?
- How did the performers use their stage space?
- What are the different ways in which the performers related to one another?
- How was speed a factor?
- What did lighting contribute?
- What were transitions between stunts like?
- How is timing employed here?
- What about levels in space?
- What are some of the props used? How were they used? How did these props inform the movement? If a given prop had been replaced by some other prop, how would that change the movement?
- What personal qualities do the performers appear to bring to this work?
- What are some of the ways in which you responded to this work — and why? Which points produced these responses?
- What thoughts does this work awaken in you in terms of culture & tradition?

Internet

Chinese variety arts

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_variety_art#History

Learn more about this amalgam of acrobatic acts, balancing acts and other demonstrations of physical skill traditionally performed by troupes in China.

Acrobatics history

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acrobatics>

Discover where today's work fits into the world of acrobatic arts.

Books

101 Circus Games for Children: Juggling –Clowning – Balancing Acts – Acrobatics – Animal Numbers

By Paul Rooyackers

Reading level: Ages 4–12

Publisher: Hunter House (February 9, 2010)

ISBN-10: 0897935160

Not a circus arts book, per se, it is instead designed as a physical activities book for children between the ages of 4 and 12 using circus related theme activities.

Flat Stanley's Worldwide Adventures #7: The Flying Chinese Wonders

By: Jeff Brown

Reading level: Ages 9–12

Publisher: HarperCollins (April 26, 2011)

ISBN-10: 0061430021

Ouch! Stanley accidentally caused twin acrobats Yin and Yang to take a tumble, right before their Chinese New Year show. Yang's foot is broken—but luckily, Flat Stanley is flexible enough to take his place. To make up for his mistake, Stanley travels to China to help out.

Hail! Ancient Chinese (Hail! History)

By: Paul C. Challen

Reading level: Ages 9–12

Publisher: Crabtree Pub Co (July 15, 2010)

ISBN-10: 0778766284

Crabtree's Hail! titles are a 32–page lively coverage of ancient times in a series perfect for reluctant history students.

DVDs

Champion Acrobats of China: Flying Lotus (2008)

Language: English (Dolby Digital 2.0)

Studio: V.I.E.W. Video

DVD Release Date: October 21, 2008

ASIN: B001ANQY7E

This riveting film, *Champion Acrobats of China: Flying Lotus*, will delight fans of the circus, acrobatics, and sports alike with some of the world's most impressive acrobats performing the amazing routines that they have been perfecting for centuries.

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