

LEARNING LINKS

**Shanghai  
Acrobats of  
the People's  
Republic of  
China:  
*Shanghai  
Nights***

**TUESDAY  
SEPTEMBER 27 2016  
9:30 AM & 11 AM  
WEDNESDAY  
SEPTEMBER 28 2016  
9:30 AM & 11 AM**

**2016 > 2017**  
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

## Shanghai Acrobats of the People's Republic of China: *Shanghai Nights*

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"I like huge  
challenges."

Zhao Shuangwu • Choreographer

### Connecting to Curriculum and Students' Lives!

**HISTORY & GEOGRAPHY** • People's Republic of China

**ARTS** • Storytelling, mime, acrobatics

#### 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?



Picture this. A boy, like millions of boys around the world, lies dreaming. In his dreams, reality gives way to a world of fantasy. Sallying forth into this strange world, he spies a phoenix – that bird of fables which is said to rise from ashes. Fairy-like, it arcs and careens in the misty blue above the ocean's undulating surface. Mesmerized by her beauty, the boy dives into the waves, carelessly and without consideration for his safety. The bird sees this and, touched by his courage, saves him. Moreover she endows him with the ability to fly at her side on balmy breezes and swim down into the depths of the teeming sea. Thus runs the first scene of *Shanghai Nights*.

The second scene quickly follows. The phoenix has led our hero to a sumptuous garden within a palace. Birds sing, clowns tumble, boys and girls send straw hats flying and catapult from teeterboards. But is any paradise safe from evils that lurk in the shadows, poised to ambush? A perfect time for...

...scene 3, which opens with the invasion of the fantasy palace by those evil lurkers mentioned just moments ago. Their goal? To seize and control the phoenix. Their method? Kill the dreaming boy. Clowns try to save the boy by making themselves scary – something, as we know, clowns are well suited for. But the phoenix is set upon all the same, and her captors proceed to tear out her feathers one by one. Pushed past her limits, the phoenix flies into the fire, which then spreads through the palace, reducing it to cinders.

Did you ever waken from a dream and glad that you have done so? Well, the 4th scene opens with the wail of a saxophone. The dreaming boy wakes – or does he? He finds himself now in a forest of fairy trees that shimmer and shine. Seeking some sign of the phoenix, he discovers a single feather. Beside himself with sorrow, he contemplates desperate measures. Happily we can report that just at this juncture, the phoenix – reborn from the fire – appears, and love is restored to its throne. A joyous finale is all that is wanting, and we are given it now.

This colorful and exciting tale is enacted by acrobats. Utilizing such well-beloved devices as Girls' Feet Juggling with Balls, Teeterboard, Clowning Kicking Bowls to Head on Rola Rola, Straw Hats' Play, Ballet on Shoulders and Hoop-diving, they tell the story of the dreaming boy and the phoenix through disciplined yet expressive movement, tensile bodies and culturally-significant actions.

## The Artists

Who has *produced* this text for study?



The Shanghai Acrobats of the People's Republic of China have been around since 1959. Those decades have seen them catapulted to the top of their field. Their influence is felt throughout China, and the troupe has performed in more than 30 countries – the United States, Germany, Spain, Britain, Mexico, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Japan, Turkey, Canada, Indonesia, Fiji, Cameroon, Guinea and Nigeria, among them. Just a small sampling of the awards and prizes they've racked up internationally include the prestigious Gold medal at the Cirque de Demain Festival, as well as the Golden prize at both the Italian Golden Circus Festival and the Russian International Circus Festival.

Tours by the Shanghai Acrobats of the People's Republic of China have introduced Chinese acrobatic and circus art to the world, and in the process, have helped forge friendships with people in many countries.

The company has toured with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. They've joined Cirque du

Soleil's *Mystere* at Treasure Island Hotel & Casino in Las Vegas. They've played Stardust's World Christmas circuses in Germany and The Netherlands. But this coast-to-coast tour is the very first look we will get at *Shanghai Nights*.

The Director of Shanghai Acrobats of the P. R. of China is Mr. Liu Junke. The Artistic Choreographer of *Shanghai Nights* is Ms. Zhao Shuangwu. Tops in her field, she has been known to embrace challenge. When called upon in another artistic endeavor to meld Western orchestral music with Chinese acrobatics – blending traditional Eastern art with classical Western art – Ms. Shuangwu averred, "I like huge challenges." Iryna Kovalova provides additional touches to the choreographic side of things.

We will let the daunting skill of the acrobats, who have been rigorously trained from childhood to take on this line of work, speak for itself. The cultural pride and technical savvy on display in these enactments of the Girls' Feet Juggling with Balls, Teeterboard, etc... are unquestioned.

"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 county of Hebei Province developed their acrobatic skills. Others point to the existence of historical records from as deep in the distant past as the Xia Dynasty (4,000 years ago) as evidence of the art form's earliest stirrings. In the fifties, 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. Place where you will the moment some Chinese folks first tumbled,

juggled, balanced on each other's shoulders, or went walking on their hands, the practice of acrobatics and those who engaged in it have taken front row seats 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, with the rise of communism in the fifties, much of that changed. 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 acrobatics has flourished!



## 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** – *LOI is an essential question that generates a lesson:* How do the Shanghai Acrobats of the People's Republic of China, in telling the story of *Shanghai Nights - Dream Journey*, use precision of execution and finely-tuned collaboration?

### ASK STUDENTS

What do we know about acrobatics? What skills are needed? What personal qualities? (For example, discipline, courage, patience)

Assemble a list on the board.

### SHOW A CLIP

[www.youtube/C4wv74EoA54](http://www.youtube/C4wv74EoA54)

(This provides an extensive look at the different parts of *Shanghai Nights*, so you may want to select in advance a particular section for sharing with students.)

Alternatively, here is a clip titled *Shanghai Night of Acrobatics – Dream Journey* that emphasizes the story-telling aspect of this performance – [www.youtube/B59nl0qdmw](http://www.youtube/B59nl0qdmw)

Have students describe what they see. Show it a second time. This time look for all the ways in which the acrobats work together. How do they?

### ASK STUDENTS

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

### IN PAIRS

Decide who will be "A" and who will be "B." Each has pipe cleaners which they form into a simple human figure. Together, think of one move you saw in the clip. Then "A" bends & shapes his/her figure into a shape that suggests the beginning of that move, while "B" adapts her/his figure to show the completion of the move. Try this several times with several different moves, if possible. Keep a written record of each. Draw them perhaps?

Each pair then shares one of their choices, showing the pipe cleaner figures. Observers describe lines, shapes, posture etc.

## ASK

What movement would connect these two poses? Who can show us that?

## SHARE SOME CONTEXT

- Chinese acrobats tend to be fairly young, because of the physical demands involved.
- They can start training as young as age 6.
- They train for a number of years.
- The company itself came into being in the '50s.
- The company works together like a family. No one gets star treatment.

## INDIVIDUALS QUIETLY CONSIDER

What's one thing you will be looking for in the performance? Write that down.



“One must be able to endure suffering  
to become a good acrobat.”

Common saying in acrobatic training schools

## After coming to the theater, students could research these:

- People's Republic of China
- Shanghai Acrobats of the People's Republic of China
- Types/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?

### PAIRS

Come up with a (safe) move you saw the performers making.

One or two volunteer pairs share. Observers describe what they see – in adjectives and verbs.

### TABLE GROUPS

Imagine you are an 8-year-old child in China. 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 in whole group. Question: In which ways does this letter make an effective case for admittance?

**“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



### 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 did the performers use their stage space?
- What are the different ways in which the performers related to one another?
- 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?
- Was humor present in this presentation – if so, how?
- What different speeds were used?
- What did lighting contribute?
- What are some of the ways in which you responded to this work – and why? Which moments in the performance produced these responses?
- What personal qualities do the performers appear to bring to this work?
- 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?
- How did the performers convey the story?
- Which parts of the story seemed most gripping? Why?
- What essential message do you carry away from this work?
- How is this particular format an effective vehicle for conveying such a story?

## Books

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

By Paul Rooyackers

Reading level: Ages 4–12

Publisher: Hunter House, 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, 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., 2010

ISBN-10: 0778766284

*Hail! History* is an entertaining look at the lives of the people who shaped ancient cultures. Each book is designed like an entertainment magazine — no stone is left unturned by Hail!'s intrepid reporters. In addition to the colorful cast of characters, everyday life in the ancient world is put under the microscope. Inquiring young minds will be fascinated by the clothes people wore, the food they ate, the houses they lived in, and how they were entertained.

## Internet

### **Their management's website**

[www.cami.com/?webid=2476](http://www.cami.com/?webid=2476)

### **Chinese variety art**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_variety\\_art#History](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_variety_art#History)

### **Acrobatics**

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

Learning Links have been created by:

**Mark Almy**

Research and text unless otherwise noted

**Mark Duebner Design**

Design

**Michael Flannigan**

Field Trip Series Coordinator

**Kajsa Thuresson-Frary**

Director of Education