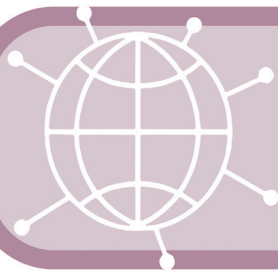


2011 > 2012 Learning Link

# The National Acrobats of The People's Republic of China

Monday, October 3, 2011, 9:30am & 11:30am

Recommended Grades: K-12



McCallum Theatre Institute  
**Field Trip Series**

A WORLD OF MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE & PERFORMANCE

Learning Links presents

## National Acrobats of the People's Republic of China

Monday, October 3, 2011

9:30 a.m. & 11:30 a.m.

*"You will hear oohhs and ahhs throughout the show."* — Yao Jianguo, director

# Connecting to Curriculum and Students' Lives!

**History & Geography:** People's Republic of China

**Arts:** acrobatics

## What is it?

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 parade are control, focus, a thorough knowledge of the art, and the ability to imagine what comes next. These qualities – and more! - pour forth in National Acrobats of the People's Republic of China's performance. 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 through these vibrant hi-jinks. And have we mentioned contortionism, martial arts, drumming and dancing? Yes, it's all – nail-bitingly – there.

## Who Does It?

Becoming one of these elite athletes is not a pursuit for the lazy or faint of heart. You are recruited at age six, seven, or eight by scouts who come to your school, on the scent of 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. Now in 2011, National Acrobats of the People's Republic of China makes its inaugural visit to Canada and the United States.

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 seventeen to twenty-two. Beyond the industry and dedication required of these performers, each must fold 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

## **What Are Its Contexts?**

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 (4000 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 2000 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, then, it has flourished.

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

Acrobatics  
Chinese history & culture

## **Here’s a 60 minute lesson 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, render age-old stunts newly vital and breathtaking?*

(\*A line of inquiry is a question that generates a lesson.)

Ask: What do we know about acrobatics? What skills are needed? What personal qualities are needed? (for example, discipline, courage, patience) Assemble a list on the board.

Show a clip: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRE\\_DOhtzZI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRE_DOhtzZI)

(You may need to download this onto a laptop at home.) 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: 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:

The performers are aged 17 through 22.

They start training at the Institution at ages 6 through 8.

They train for a minimum of 6 years.

The company began in the 'fifties.

The company works together like a family. No one gets star treatment.

Etc.

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

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

People's Republic of China

National 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?

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 eight 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."*

## **What do YOU think?**

**How would you answer these questions --- and how could these questions be adapted for student use?**

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 points 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?

## **Internet**

Their management's website:  
<http://www.cami.com/?webid=1928>

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

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

## 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 provide fine 32-page lively coverages 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.

*"We have had such wonderful audiences. Each audience gave us a standing ovation at the end of the show."* — Yao Jianguo, director