

2011 > 2012 Learning Link

Jason and the Argonauts

Visible Fictions

Monday, April 2, 2012, 11:30am

Tuesday, April 3, 2012, 9:00am & 11:30am

Recommended Grades: 3-12



McCallum Theatre Institute
Field Trip Series

A WORLD OF MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE & PERFORMANCE

Learning Links presents

Visible Fictions: Jason and the Argonauts

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"I love an adventure. And if I can't have that, the next best thing is a good adventure story" — Douglas Irvine, director

Connecting to Curriculum and Students' Lives!

History & Geography: Greece

Arts: theater

Language Arts: plays, mythology

What is it?

Have you had the experience of seeing a book you've read dramatized? Chances are, like most of us, you can answer: many times. What kinds of things run through your head as you watch? A certain surprise how differently actors and directors have realized characters and situations from the version you cobbled together in your imagination as you read? Or perhaps satisfaction at how closely the screen or stage version corresponds to your own private one? Bay Area Children's Theatre routinely ushers beloved works from the page to the stage as they march through the canon of children's literature. Perhaps nearly everyone who has read one or more of the many volumes of *The Magic School bus* has formed some idea of what Ms. Frizzle looks and sounds like. In the tuneful theatricalization at hand, some wonderfully engaging choices have been made by the artists, as they give us their version of The Friz and her reptilian sidekick Liz. Resourceful teacher that she is, Ms. Frizzle casts about for a way to bring the issue of global warming home for her students. Off she whisks them (aboard the eponymous bus) to witness for themselves science principles in action. Along the way they go soaring through the atmosphere – from the equator to the polar caps – to gain insight into the warming process. Then, it's a tour above wind and solar power generators for a glimpse at alternatives to oil, followed by a buzz over the roofs and steeples of their own town to spy carbon dioxide emissions. Now, this particular field trip has a short term as well as a long term goal. The immediate result will be a play about global warming, written and acted by the entire class. The more far-reaching effect? Well, let's just say a certain amount of brainstorming by the students will produce some mighty powerful energy-saving ideas.

Who Does It?

Jason is a happy boy of twenty. But there is a dark secret in his past --- and he knows nothing about it. You see, when he was a mere sprout, his uncle murdered his father, and now that uncle rules in his father's stead. It takes an appearance by said father --- or rather his ghost coming to the boy in dreams --- to alert Jason to the family tragedy and set him on a course toward justice. Sounds a bit like *The O.C.* meets *Hamlet*, hmm? Actually, this is the Jason from Greek antiquity --- yes, *that* Jason, he of the Golden Fleece. And what a role it is, too! The perfect job for an actor with the right set of chops. The ideal opportunity for --- a G. I. Joe action figure!

Errrk! Rewind! Did we say G. I. Joe action figure??? If you've never heard of the Scottish theater troupe Visible Fictions, you will surely never forget them after attending **Jason and the Argonauts**. Part minimalist avante garde theater (think **Waiting for Godot**, or **Ionesco**), part zany romp, part puppet show (using action figures), it is a bracingly re-considered look at a familiar tale. Two actors, replete with Scottish accents and English Theatre pedigrees, embody all of the roles, that is, when they're not manipulating the G. I. Joes who take over the acting assignments from time to time.

The physical set, which always arouses favorable notice, is largely composed of an all-purpose platform. Through various metamorphoses, it converts from cart to ship *Argos* to Colchis, the Land At the End of the World. At other times, the *Argos* is portrayed by a piece of folded newspaper culled from a large trunk that also lives on stage. It's precisely this free wheeling style that catches us by surprise and whooshes us along on one of the great journeys in Greek literature.

It's not just a journey to distant lands, either, as diverting as that may be. No, it's an interior journey, too --- Jason's, as he sails steadily toward greater awareness and belief in self. He gains understanding, and so do we as we grapple with themes like independence, interdependence, and undergoing life's transitions.

Ahoy, matey!

Who Is Responsible?

Let's say you've got an itch to stage the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece. What approaches spring to mind? If you're director Douglas Irvine, your initial vision involves enormous tanks of water and a stage peopled with life-sized puppets. Maybe there's something in the Greek nature of the project that inspired such Herculean concepts! In any case, budget restrictions stepped in and established a different direction. "Hmm," said Mr. Irvine next. "What would happen if we got two actors to play with G. I. Joe dolls?" He goes on to say, "At first, the writer Robert Forrest looked at me like I was crazy." Of course, Mr. Forrest, a professional writer for over twenty-five years, has produced a steady stream of viable theater works and in the process filled his shelves with awards for same. (He has written for TV too, and published short stories.) Mr. Irvine, however, is himself no slouch. Founding member of Visible Fictions, he has shepherded many works to public acclaim. Under his watch, Visible Fictions has distinguished itself as the first Scottish company to perform on Broadway. A little closer to our own domain, he has directed for the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. So, when he floated his zany suggestion, Mr. Forrest and others knew that he could do what he set his mind on doing. Those others referred to include Glasgow-based composer Daniel Padden. This musician has written music for theater, TV, and the movies. He also produces music workshops for children, "reflecting [says the theater website] his beliefs that learning and creating music should involve improvising and experimenting." Then, there are the two actors whose tireless energy and improvisatory skill has teamed with Mr. Irvine's ingenuity to bring (at last count) fifteen characters to life. And that includes a harpy and a dragon! Simon Donaldson, trained at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, has won awards for his work in radio. And Tim Settle, whose prior gigs with Visible Fictions include a version of *Where the Wild Things Are*, has worked with the Oxford and Cambridge Shakespeare Festivals.

As for the company itself, well, prepare to break out into a lusty chorus of Happy Birthday, because it's sweet sixteen! With a raft of productions each season both at home and on tour, this scrappy company is "always aiming to challenge, excite and thrill. No two Visible Fictions performances are alike." They guest at prestigious festivals and collaborate with the BBC on occasion. Stateside, they have forged links with Seattle Children's Theater and the Children's Theater Company of Minneapolis.

"I'm delighted we're passing this old myth on to you in a brand new telling." —Douglas Irvine

At the Root of It All

So just who was this Jason? Did he really live? Was he a fictionalized version of someone back in the mist enshrouded long-ago? In fact, he is considered, along with Odysseus and Herakles, one of the great heroes of Greek mythology. So no, alas, he did not live, but was created presumably as a figure whose story could both amaze and instruct. When we go investigating, we quickly discover that he shows up in many written works. Chief among these is the **Argonautica** by Apollonius of Rhodes. This celebrated epic poem was written in Alexandria in the late Third Century BC. Other *Argonauticas* came later. For example, that of Flaccus, who in the late First Century AD found substance enough in Jason's story to fill eight full volumes. The valiant adventurer also rates a mention in the formidable Divine Comedy of the formidable Dante, though he doesn't emerge from the experience unscathed. The Italian poet locates our poor hero in the eighth rung of Hell, a fate reserved for seducers --- possibly a reference to his shabby treatment of **Medea**. (That lamentable, later chapter in his life remains unexplored by G. I. Joe dolls at this point.) This same late episode received ample exposure in *Medea*, an immortal treatment by the Greek dramatist Euripedes. Seneca, too, took his jabs at the unhappy pair in his own *Medea* play. Both of these works, naturally enough, interest themselves more with the spurned girlfriend than with the feckless betrayer. In our own times, too, Jason's exploits have netted him a place in popular fiction and in Hollywood's pantheon. The film, *Jason And the Argonauts*, a classic of its kind, can still stir up a lust for adventure in sedentary hearts.

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

Jason, the character & the myth
Mythology
Puppet theater

Here's a 60 minute lesson you could teach to help prepare students for this work:

*Line of Inquiry** How does Visible Fictions take us on Jason's voyage by embodying all the characters both personally and through the manipulation of action figures?

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

[note: This lesson requires the use of action figures, dolls, or other forms of human/animal figure.]

In small groups, students read one of several Greek myths, including that of Jason, in simplified synopsis form.

Short discussion: Using your bodies, how could you show each of these characters? How would they stand? Move? What would their voices sound like?

Small groups set work on acting out their myths. Encourage students to use their own words and to rehearse multiple times. "Pay attention to what your character looks like, how they move, what they sound like. Use narration as well as dialogue." (Ask for definitions and examples of both and be prepared, of course, to offer some if students are stumped.)

These presentations are then shared. Ask: How is voice used? Movement? Stance?

Next, groups figure out how to adapt their presentations using figures. They transfer their own action as actors to the action figures, which they now manipulate to tell the story.

These versions are also shared. Ask: How is your work in this version different? What preparation did you have to make? What special challenges rose in making this adaptation? How does this new format change the story or the responses it evokes?

Ask: Here's a special challenge. Think for a moment. How could you tell your story both acting the roles out with your body but also using the figures to act those same roles? (Whichever answers arise, the question helps students notice when Visible Fictions takes on this challenge.)

After coming to the theater, students could research these:

Greece
Ancient Greek culture
Ships and ship travel

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

Have students take a look back at the performance. Which moments stood out, and why? How did the actors present characters using their bodies & voices? How did they do so in presenting multiple characters? How did action figures fit into the work? How did roles transfer from actor to figure --- and back again? Was this effective? What effects were the actors going for?

Students return to their small groups and revive their myth presentations. Now that they have both experienced Visible Fictions' version and reflected on that experience, have them integrate both approaches --- roles performed by actors and by figures --- in their own presentations. Ask them also to consider each actor performing multiple roles.

Encourage them to rehearse several times.

These are then shared with the whole class. Questions after each presentation mine the new choices students have made as a result of experiencing **Jason And the Argonauts**.

Ask: Why mix acting with our own bodies and the use of figures within a single presentation?

"[We are] always aiming to challenge, excite, and thrill."—Visible Fictions website

What do YOU think?

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

How did the actors use the stage space? How did the set creator do so?

How did the actors use different levels --- and with what effect?

How was the set designed? In what ways was it realistic, in what ways stylized? What colors predominated? What clues to geographical location did it contain?

How did the actors use their bodies? How were different characters revealed through physical movements?

Through stance? Posture?

How did they use their voices to create characters? How would you describe their various vocal qualities? How

was volume level used?

What sort of language was used in the script? Did it strike a tone of "antiquity?" Were there contemporary elements?

How was conflict created on stage?

What role did humor play in this presentation?

How did directorial choices contribute to the drama of this work?

What sorts of sounds did the actors make that weren't strictly speaking words? How were sound effects used?

What about music? What period(s) did the music suggest? How did the music contribute to the action?

How was lighting a contributing feature?

What kind of rhythm was created through scene transitions, and length of scenes?

What are the big themes in this piece?

What value lies in mixing actors and figures as in this production? In which ways did this choice produce a good vehicle for a story like this?

Internet

Wiki speaks: Jason

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jason

A blurb about the old film

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jason_and_the_Argonauts_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jason_and_the_Argonauts_(film))

Short segments of the Jason myth

www.mythweb.com/heroes/jason/

Might be useful: The Argonautica by Apollonius Rhodius

<http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/jasonargonauts/a/030108Argonauti.htm>

More info on our hero

www.greece.org/poseidon/work/argonautika/argo.html

Visible Fictions

www.visiblefictions.co.uk/

Books

Jason and the Golden Fleece

By James Riordan

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Frances Lincoln Children's Books (April 10, 2005)

ISBN-10: 1845070615

Award-winning children's author James Riordan boldly retells this story from Greek mythology, introducing readers to the first great European hero to undertake a grand journey.

The Golden Fleece: And the Heroes Who Lived Before Achilles

By Padraic Colum

Reading Level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Aladdin (June 22, 2004)

ISBN-10: 0689868847

Author Padraic Colum weaves the tales of Jason and his Argonauts with classic Greek mythology to create this captivating epic about life, war, and astounding beings who lived in a time long past.

Young Reading: Jason and the Golden Fleece

By Claudia Zeff

Reading Level: Young

Paperback: 64 pages

Publisher: Usborne Publishing Ltd (April 25, 2003)

ISBN-10: 0746054106

Graphic Myths and Legends: Jason: Quest for the Golden Fleece: a Greek Myth

By Jeff Limke

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Graphic Universe (February 2008)

ISBN-10: 0822565714

The Graphic Myths and Legends series brings to life some of the most enduring tales from a variety of cultures. Action-packed and richly illustrated, the age-old stories will engage readers in new ways.

Jason y los argonautas/ Jason and the Argonauts (Spanish Edition)

By John Malam

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Panamericana Editorial (July 30, 2006)

Language: Spanish

ISBN-10: 9583018503

Films

Jason and the Argonauts (1963)

Actors: Todd Armstrong, Nancy Kovack, Gary Raymond

Director: Don Chaffey

Format: Closed-captioned, Color, DVD, Full Screen, Letterboxed, Widescreen, NTSC

Studio: Sony Pictures

DVD Release Date: July 14, 1998

Jason and the Argonauts (2000)

Actors: Frank Langella, Derek Jacobi

Director: Nick Willing

Format: Closed-captioned, Color, DVD, Full Screen, NTSC

Studio: Lions Gate

DVD Release Date: August 15, 2000

"I hope the story thrills you as much as it thrills me and, who knows, it may even inspire you when you have your own next adventure." — Douglas Irvine