

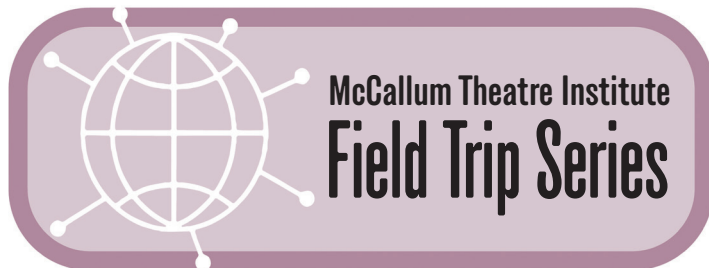
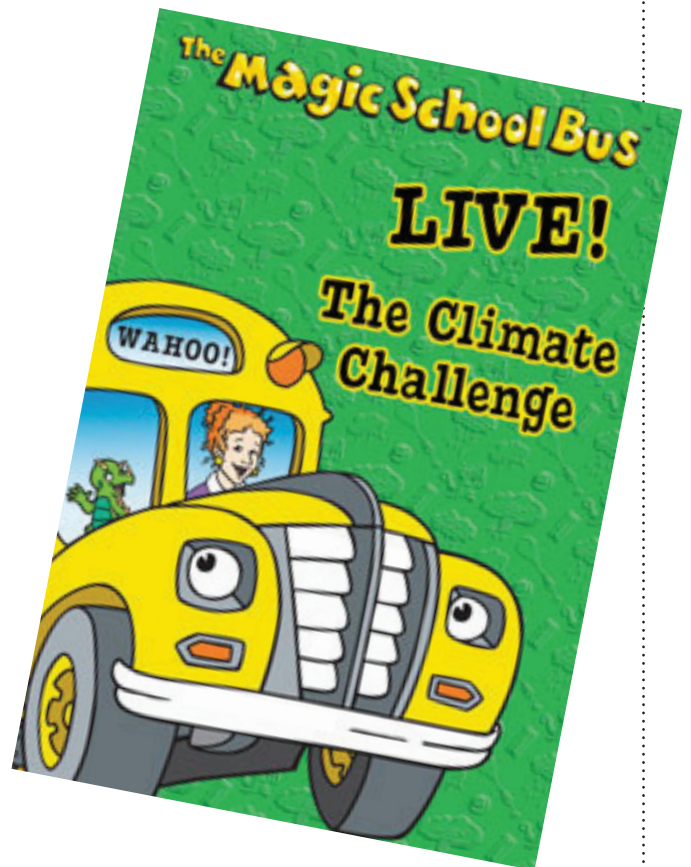
2011 > 2012 Learning Link

The Magic School Bus

Bay Area Children's Theatre

Monday, October 31, 2011, 9:30am & 11:30am
Tuesday, November 1, 2011, 9:30am & 11:30am

Recommended Grades: PreK-3



A WORLD OF MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE & PERFORMANCE

Learning Links presents

Bay Area Children's Theatre: The Magic School Bus

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"I write about ideas. I try to ask an implicit question. Then I try to answer the question in writing the book." — author Joanna Cole

Connecting to Curriculum and Students' Lives!

Language Arts: Children's Literature, reading

Science: greenhouse effect, alternative power sources, carbon dioxide emissions, weather

Arts: theater, music

21st Century skills: observation, imagination, problem-solving, creativity, cooperation and teamwork

Students' lives: environmental issues, recycling

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?

Scott Elmegreen, who has written both the music and words to every song in the show, is a dynamo from New York City, whose recent work includes a stint on Broadway writing for Conan O'Brien. He talks about his other projects: "I'm finishing up a young adult novel I've had in the works for some time, I'm illustrating a children's book (I guess I just never grew up...), and I'm writing a play on my own." When asked about his choice of a career, he offers, "My parents are both professional astrophysicists and my sister is getting her PhD in atmospheric and oceanographic studies, so it's only logical that I would have gone into the arts." (We detect a dry sense of humor among his various qualities...) While at Princeton, Mr. Elmegreen pursued a degree in music and one in creative writing. His theses (both of them) combined music and words in very inventive ways. Needless to say he made quite an impression on his professors. He's making impressions still!

Doug Cooney has written the book to *The Magic School Bus*. Book, in this case, refers to all the words in the show with the exception of the song lyrics. He's a busy fellow. South Coast Repertory. Mark Taper Forum. Sundance Theater Lab. He's co-authored work with actress Marlee Matlin which went on national tour, and he's written screenplays as well.

Then there's Joanna Cole, whose slew of kids' books have been wildly successful. She didn't start out to become a writer, though. She had her sights set on teaching – and she had a particular area of teaching in mind. Thinking back on her own schooling, she realized that the learning she most loved – and benefited from – came between kindergarten and sixth grade. So, she was bent on becoming a grade school educator – and she did. As she settled into her vocation, however, she came across an article one day in *The Wall Street Journal* that piqued her interest. Its subject? Cockroaches. Pondering over her own education, she realized she had never read anything on the subject of cockroaches at school. So she set out to write her own book. After initial rebuffs from publishing houses, William Morrow nibbled at her line. She was assigned a helpful editor – and in short order her writing career was launched. Of course it was a few years before she gave up her day job – but since that time her books have helped countless children get a grasp on science.

"Grade school was very important to me, much more influential than my later education." — author Joanna Cole

What Are Its Contexts?

Theater artists have very often, through the ages, used plays to instruct, to raise social consciousness, and to suggest change. Sometimes the change is social, sometimes political. Of course, it can be both. Although *The Magic School Bus* is a work designed for youngsters, in some ways it belongs to the tradition of theater that promotes change. The various artists involved see a problem – greenhouse gases, global warming – convey their concern in an entertaining and informative way, and suggest change. Of course, any point of view may be met with an opposing one – and a cursory glance at today's news tells us that the notion of global warming is by no means universally embraced as fact.

In theater of this sort (theater for change, protest theater, theater for development, political theater; there are many names and categories), duality of response is hardly new. In ancient Greece, satirical theater with a political slant often leveled quite a blow at the current state of things. Many in the audience were swayed – but you can bet not all citizens of Athens were on board. This early exponent of democracy allowed for substantial social and political self-scrutiny – something mirrored in our own country today. (Not every country, however, has been so willing to let theater call its practices into question. History is littered with examples of theater artists imprisoned – or worse.)

In times closer to our own, the Scandinavian playwrights Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg – as well as the British G. B Shaw – wrote enormously popular pieces which succeeded brilliantly as both art and calls for reform. The German Modernist (later repatriated to America) Bertolt Brecht, while overhauling the very form of playwriting itself, often took social injustice as his theme. And Clifford Odets, very much occupying the Left in the mid-century American political landscape, wrote play after play excoriating the status quo. Such plays were not meant to go down easily. They had ruffled feathers in mind.

Homelessness, women's right, the environment – these are just a few of the topics theater can broach with passion (and controversy.) A particular strain of this sort of theater, Theater for Development, oftentimes gets the audience participating and even improvising. And then there's Invisible Theater. This is acted in the streets, launched in a public place to the surprise of passersby who may never otherwise find themselves in a theater.

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

global warming/climate change
theater as a tool for change
environmental issues
The Magic School bus book series

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

*Line of Inquiry** How does Bay Area Children's Theater amplify the themes of problem and solution in the story *The Magic School Bus* by turning it into vivid theater?

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

Discussion: What is global warming? What produces it? Does everyone agree that it's real. (It might be valuable to share the fact that not everyone does agree. In our democracy we like the fact that different views can be advanced.) What are some things that humans could do differently that might help reverse global warming? What are some other things we can think of that might need changing? (Prejudice, throwing everything into the landfill, homelessness, bullying, etc. Write these on large paper for reference.)

Pairs: Choose one thing from our list you think needs changing. Together, come up with a couple of things people could do to bring about that change.

Share these aloud.

Context: Share with them a little bit about how theater has been used to produce change.

Ask: What are some stories we know that tell us to change what we're doing – or behave in a better way? (List these.)

Table Groups: Select one of these stories. Determine which scene you would like, as a group of 4, to act out. Decide who will play which character. What other jobs could a group member have? For now, in our remaining minutes, you are planning what you will try out next time. Make notes.

Share these initial plans out loud in the whole group, to give everyone an idea of what people are coming up with.

After coming to the theater, students could research these:

greenhouse effect
alternative power sources
carbon dioxide emissions
weather

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 characters. How did they move and speak? What were the different events in the plot? How was music used? How did the performers interrelate? What emotions were conveyed – and how? What props were used – and how? What were the themes – and how did each of the characters respond to these? What opinions do you think the writer(s) had about these themes? What makes you say that? How was the idea of change explored? Did the creators make their case – and how? What surprised you? What do you want to know more about?

Table groups: Revisit your discussion from last time. How might your plans change now that you've seen Bay Area Children's Theatre at work? When you've got a good plan together, get up on your feet and try it out.

Perform these. Ask open-ended questions about characterizations, movement, voice, props etc. and how these aid the creators in putting their message across.

Individuals: Take a few quiet minutes to write: If theater is a good way to reach people and change things, why is this so?

"I discovered in the fifth grade what I liked to do; write reports and stories, make them interesting or funny." — author Joanna Cole

What do YOU think?

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

How were levels and stage space used?

How was location indicated?

How would you describe the costuming?

How many actors were there – and how did they divide up the roles?

What did you notice about the physicality with which the actors brought the characters to life?

What sorts of voices did they use to create characters?

Where were story elements like conflict and resolution present?

What made you laugh and why?

How did the pacing of the performance help or hinder its effectiveness, in your opinion??

How did they use music?

What are some of the themes in this work – and how were they advanced?

What props were used and how?

What new ideas about theater and its potential purposes did you come away with?

Internet

EPA Environmental Kids Club Home Page:

<http://www.epa.gov/kids/>

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's site for kids.

A Student's Guide to Global Climate Change | US EPA:

<http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/kids/index.html>

Focuses on science and impacts of global warming or climate change, and on actions that help address global warming. Features games, events, and links.

Global Warming:

library.thinkquest.org/CR0215471/global_warming.htm

Matter of fact explanations of environmental issues.

Books

The Magic School Bus And The Climate Challenge

By Joanna Cole, Bruce Degen

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Scholastic Press (March 1, 2010)

ISBN-10: 0590108263

With trademark simplicity and wit, Joanna Cole explains why the earth is getting warmer, and Bruce Degen's bright, action-filled illustrations make the science easy to understand and fun to learn.

Global Warming

By: Seymour Simon

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Collins (February 23, 2010)

ISBN-10: 0061142506

Simon's consistently high-quality collaborations with the Smithsonian investigate all manner of science topics for young readers, and here take on the timely matter of climate change.

Down-to-Earth Guide To Global Warming

By: Laurie David, Cambria Gordon

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Orchard Books (September 1, 2007)

ISBN-10: 0439024943

Down To Earth is filled with fact about global warming and its disastrous consequences, loads of photos and illustrations, as well as suggestions for how kids can help combat global warming in their homes, schools, and communities.

Why Are the Ice Caps Melting?: The Dangers of Global Warming (Let's-Read-and-Find-Out Science 2)

By: Anne Rockwell, Paul Meisel

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Collins (November 7, 2006)

ISBN-10: 9780060546717

The book begins by introducing Earth as a remarkable place that may be the only spot where conditions are right for life. She goes on to explain in simple language the greenhouse effect, the sources of global warming, what the effects of warming have been so far and what they might be in the future.

Kids Take the Stage: Helping Young People Discover the Creative Outlet of Theater

By: Lenka Petersen, Dan O'Connor, Paul Newman

Reading level: Adult (designed for teachers)

Publisher: Back Stage Books (May 1, 2006)

ISBN-10: 0823077462

For teachers, for parents, for budding actors, emerging crew, and incipient directors—this is the book that shows how to get a production up and running...and have fun in the process.

CDs

The Magic School Bus: Space Adventures

Studio: Warner Home Video

DVD Release Date: September 1, 2009

ASIN: B002JUFPE0

There are a whole slew of these Magic School Bus DVDs available on various themes.

“All I could think about was the kids who will read [The Magic School Bus.] I wanted to give them hope... Their own actions as children can help can help solve the crisis of global warming.” — author Joanna Cole