



2009 > 10 A WORLD OF MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE & PERFORMANCE

2009 > 2010 Learning Link



Strega Nona

performed by **Active Arts Theater for Young Audiences**

Thursday, October 22, 2009, 9:30am & 11:00am

Recommended Grades: K-4



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“To enchant young audiences with performances drawn from life and literature, introduce children of all backgrounds to the joy and excitement of live theatre, and create a welcoming, entertaining, and educational environment for exploring the arts.”

--- Mission statement, Active Arts Theater for Young Audiences

Connecting to Curriculum and Students’ Lives!

History & Geography: Italy

Language Arts: Folktale genre

Arts: Theater, dance, music

What is it?

If you were going to fashion a musical from noted children’s author Tomie dePaola’s modern classic, “Strega Nona,” what would you put in it? Characters as colorfully drawn as those who populate the book? Snappy dialogue behind which seem to lurk a twinkling eye and the impulse

to laugh? Would you construct songs in primary hues, lyrics and melodies as appealing and open-hearted as dePaola's illustrations? If so, you must be thinking along the same lines as the creators of this enchanting musical fable. Songs such as "Me" with its line "Have you ever seen anything as beautiful as me?" or the energetic opener "We Celebrate Life" seem to burst off the canvas of sound with a vibrancy akin to dePaola's images. Not subtle perhaps, but lovely and bright. Then, too, there's "Sticky Noodles" in which --- but maybe you know the story already? Diminutive Strega Nona (did you know *strega* is Italian for witch?) with her bulbous nose and substantial chin, her hair bound up in a scarf, lives in Calabria in the southernmost part of Italy, the so-to-speak toe of the Italian boot. She's the go-to person for spells, potions, and cures. She always has a great pot of pasta bubbling away on her stove, from which she dispenses nourishment and magic in liberal doses. In the course of her story, we learn that she has engaged a young man, Big Anthony, to watch her house and tend her garden in her absence when she's off visiting. Alas, Big Anthony is equally captivated by the magical properties of Strega Nona's pot and by its flavorful contents. As soon as his employer is gone, he wastes no time in speaking out the incantation, and the pot responds in ways both comic and disastrous.

What happens when a story emerges from the pages of a book and leaps onstage? How is seeing and hearing different from reading? How does a solitary experience become a communal one? How are the characters a reader has constructed in the workshop of his or her imagination different from those which adapters and performers have re-imagined? Then again, how are they similar? And how can song be used to expand our understanding of characters and to further a plot we may know from a song-less context?

Discover.



Who Is It?

One starts with New England writer Tomie dePaola, the source of this beguiling and instructive tale. With such a name you might assume an Italian heritage --- but, surprise, he's Irish too! If you're familiar with his Strega Nona series, you may be laboring under another common assumption as well: that he reworked an already existing folktale. Wrong. His central character emerged one day during a faculty meeting at a college where he was teaching theater classes. He

was doodling, as was his custom during such get-togethers. His pencil scribbling furiously away, one of his various images of the Italian figure Punchinello suddenly acquired a headscarf and a name: Strega Nona. As good characters do, she began at once to assert herself, establishing who she was and what sorts of things she would do. And it was not too long after that --- as you shall read shortly --- that an additional series of events occurred which set this story on its journey toward publication.

Now, Tomie dePaola has published over two hundred titles (imagine!) and he has received countless awards including the Caldecott and the Newberry. Drawn to artistic endeavors from a very early age, he attended the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and has in addition to his prodigious career as author-illustrator also taught extensively and even acted from time to time.

Let's turn our attention to the adapters. Thomas Olson and Roberta Carlson are the visionaries who saw theatrical potential in "Strega Nona" and found a way to get these characters on their feet and moving across the theater boards. The score, replete with songs that have the bounce of colorful balls, comes to us courtesy of Aron Accorso. You'll want to know about him that he has won awards, too, and participated in the Lehman Engel Memorial Musical Theater Workshop in New York (a plum!). Not surprisingly, Mr. dePaola himself consulted with this creative team in the generation of Strega Nona: The Musical.

"ACTIVE ARTS THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES *is an Oakland-based professional, non-profit theater company founded by veteran actors and educators from the Bay Area's vibrant theater scene."*

--- Active Arts Theater website

Roots

Here's what Tomie dePaola has to say about the creation of Strega Nona:

In the early 1970s, I was teaching in the theater department at what is now Colby-Sawyer College in New Hampshire (where I live). My books were beginning to get noticed, so my

editor at Prentice-Hall (now Simon & Schuster), Ellen Roberts, suggested that I look into re-telling a folk tale. Of course, I would also illustrate it.

Well, some months before at a required weekly college faculty meeting (I always sat in the back row with a legal pad and doodled. The administration thought I was taking notes.), I was, as usual, doodling. I was "obsessed" with the Italian commedia dell'arte character Punchinello. So many of my doodles were of him - big nose, big chin.

On my pad, I drew the profile, but suddenly I found I had drawn a headscarf. I put in the eye and the smiling mouth and continued to draw a little chubby body complete with long skirt and apron. And I scribbled the words "Strega Nona" next to the drawing.

I was tickled pink. She was so cute, so Italian, I thought I might be able to use her in a book someday. I pinned the doodle up on my studio wall.

Back to Ellen Roberts and her suggestion that I re-tell a folk tale.

"What was one of your favorite folk tales when you were a child?" she asked.

"The Porridge Pot story," I answered immediately.

"Why don't you re-read it in a version that's in the Public Domain and see if you're interested enough in it to re-tell it," Ellen said.

So, I re-read the story. But, I didn't really like it. Suddenly, LIGHT BULB TIME!

Maybe I could change PORRIDGE to PASTA and I could use my little Strega Nona (who was already "telling" me who she was").

I called Ellen to ask if it was "legal" to re-tell a story.

"Of course," she said, "as long as the story is in the Public Domain." (A story in the Public Domain is a story for which the copyright has expired or lapsed. Public Domain stories are usually very old.)

So, I started working on the text for STREGA NONA.

The original manuscript written by hand on a yellow legal pad is at the Kerlan Children's Literature Research Collection at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. (Children's book writers and illustrators give their book manuscript materials and illustration materials to the Kerlan to safely preserve forever. Similar repositories are at the University of Connecticut and at the University of Southern Mississippi.) If you ever get a chance to see the original manuscript, you'll notice that Big Anthony was originally a GIRL named Concetta! But, I felt that the world did not need one more not-too-bright servant

girl in folklore, so I crossed out "Concetta" and wrote instead "Big Anthony, who did not pay attention."

Here's the Porridge Pot story from Wikipedia:

There was a poor but good little girl who lived alone with her mother, and they no longer had anything to eat. So the child went into the forest, and there an aged woman met her who was aware of her sorrow, and presented her with a little pot, which when she said, "Cook, little pot, cook," would cook good, sweet porridge, and when she said, "Stop, little pot," it ceased to cook. The girl took the pot home to her mother, and now they were freed from their poverty and hunger, and ate sweet porridge as often as they chose. Once on a time when the girl had gone out, her mother said, "Cook, little pot, cook." And it did cook and she ate until she was satisfied, and then she wanted the pot to stop cooking, but did not know the word. So it went on cooking and the porridge rose over the edge, and still it cooked on until the kitchen and whole house were full, and then the next house, and then the whole street, just as if it wanted to satisfy the hunger of the whole world, and there was the greatest distress, but no one knew how to stop it. At last when only one single house remained, the child came home and just said, "Stop, little pot," and it stopped and gave up cooking, and whosoever wished to return to the town had to eat their way back.

Infoplease.com informs us that Punchinello is "a grotesque or absurd chief character in a puppet show of Italian origin." He comes from the Commedia dell'arte tradition. Commedia dell'arte is --- again, according to infoplease.com ---

"Italian popular comedy, developed chiefly during the 16th-18th centuries, in which masked entertainers improvised from a plot outline based on themes associated with stock characters and situations."

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

- Music theater
- Theatrical adaptations of literature
- Folktale genre
- Tomie dePaola

You Might Like to Teach this 60 Minute Lesson Prior to the Performance

Line of Inquiry: How does Active Arts Theater for Young Audiences make adaptive, directorial, and acting choices that bring the story of *Strega Nona* to musical theater life?*

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

First, a discussion. Gather everything the students know on the following subjects: **Actors, Directors and Adapters.**

Teachers ask the students: What do **actors** do? (Student answers might include: work as a team, rehearse, memorize, show characters, project their voices, sing)

Teachers ask the students: What do **directors** do? (Student answers might include: tell actors where to go onstage, tell actors how to make their characters interesting, coordinate everyone, make sure the story is clear)

Teachers ask the students: What do **adapters** do? (Student answers might include: learn the original story really well, choose what parts to keep and what parts to leave out, sometimes add dialogue, decide where songs should go and what they should sound like)

Next, hand out at least four or five *Strega Nona* stories: (Stories can be read in small groups if number of books is limited)

- *Strega Nona Meets Her Match*
- *Strega Nona Takes a Vacation*
- *Big Anthony: His Story*
- *Merry Christmas, Strega Nona*
- *Strega Nona's Magic Lesson*

Students read their books and each student chooses whether to be an adapter, director, or actor. Then, each student writes down a page of ideas: "All the different ideas I have about how to _____ (adapt, direct, act) this story for the theater."

Next, students get together with those students who have their same story and compare notes. How could they pool their ideas to make an exciting theater piece?

Finally, each group gets a chance to quickly share out loud some of their key ideas.

After coming to the performance, students could research these:

- Italy, especially Calabria
- Commedia dell'Arte, especially Punchinello
- Children's Literature

You Might Like to Teach this 60 Minute Lesson After the Performance

Note: This lesson is to be used if you have done the pre-performance lesson on the previous page.

First, lead a recalling of the performance. What did the actors do and how did they do these things? What evidence did we see/hear that tells us a director was involved? How did the songs fit into the story? What other things seemed the result of adapter input?

Next, students return to their small groups. Reviewing their papers from last time, they also recall the ideas that surfaced in their small group discussion.

Together, they decide where to put a song in their story. They choose a melody (Row Row Row Your Boat, for example) and make up new words which connect to the story line.

Next, they choose who will act and direct. Each can have a voice in adapting.

They proceed to turn their story into a musical play, working both quickly and cooperatively.

These are shared with the rest of the class. Observers are encouraged to describe what they see & hear.

Ask: What are we learning about adapting stories to musical plays by trying it ourselves today?

*“I always make sure I know my characters
and exactly how they ‘speak.’”*

--- Tomie dePaola

What do YOU think?

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

- When did the music best support the action onstage? Why was this so?
- What are the different ways in which music was used?
- What were some emotions this work provoked in you? Why was that?
- How were the scenes sequenced? Was there a sense of building to a climax? Which scene provided the climax?
- How were production aspects --- lighting, costuming, sets --- used?
- What were some funny moments in the show --- and what specifically made them so?

- What evidence was there that a director guided the creation of this work?
- What ideas were embodied in this work?
- How was contrast used in this performance?
- How would you describe the actors' physical movement? How was movement different for different characters? How was movement used to convey changes of emotion or other changes in a particular character?
- Which moment in the show gave you the most pleasure --- and why?
- If you could perform one role in the show (and possessed the necessary prowess) which would it be? Why? What prowess or preparation would you need?
- What telltale signs assured us that the performers were paying attention to each other?
- What were the different kinds of energy on display?

Internet

Strega Nona Study Guide

www.ccanh.com/study.../Strega%20Nona%20Study%20Guide.pdf

The book

www.tomie.com/books/spotlight_on.html

italophiles.com/strega_nona.htm

Download the audio book

www.audible.com/adbl/site/.../ProductDetail.jsp?...BK...

Another musical version on YouTube

(Note: it comes in short segments)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KGIMxnaQ6M8&feature=related>

A preschool Strega Nona lesson which could be adapted to Kinders or 1st:

www.brighthub.com/education/early-childhood/.../34822.aspx

Books

Strega Nona

by Tomie dePaola

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Little Simon

ISBN-10: 0689817649

Strega Nona: Her Story

by Tomie dePaola

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Putnam Juvenile

ISBN-10: 0698118146

Strega Nona's Magic Lessons

by Tomie dePaola

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Sandpiper

ISBN-10: 0152817867

Strega Nona Takes a Vacation

by Tomie dePaola

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Puffin

ISBN-10: 0142500763

Merry Christmas, Strega Nona

by Tomie dePaola

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Sandpiper

ISBN-10: 015253184X

Strega Nona Meets Her Match

by Tomie dePaola

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Putnam Juvenile

ISBN-10: 0698114116

Big Anthony and the Magic Ring

by Tomie dePaola

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Sandpiper; Reissue edition

ISBN-10: 0156119072

Big Anthony: His Story

by Tomie dePaola

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Putnam Juvenile

ISBN-10: 0698118936

On the Wing of a Whitebird: A Tomie dePaola Resource Book

by Val Z. Hornburg

Publisher: Teacher Ideas Press, an imprint of Libraries Unlimited

ISBN-10: 1594690073

This book provides literacy ideas for many of the books Tomie dePaola has illustrated and/or written. Ideas for introducing each book are presented, as are comprehension questions. Ideas for making connections through other curriculum areas, including writing, art, mathematics, science, social studies and drama, are included as well. Grades K-3.

Tomie dePaola: His Art & His Stories

by Barbara Elleman

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Putnam Juvenile

ISBN-10: 0399231293

“It has always been important to bring the musical to the audiences that it was meant for. Throughout the different productions, shows have been scheduled at different times throughout the day, to ensure that families and audience members of all ages were able to experience the joy of this classic book on stage.

--- producer, Maximum Entertainment website