

2011 > 2012 Learning Link

Sylvester and The Magic Pebble

Enchantment Theatre Company

Monday, February 27, 2012, 9:30am & 11:00am

Recommended Grades: PreK-3



McCallum Theatre Institute
Field Trip Series

A WORLD OF MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE & PERFORMANCE

Learning Links presents

Enchantment Theatre Company: Sylvester and the Magic Pebble

Monday, February 27, 2012

9:30 a.m. & 11:00 a.m.

“Since Enchantment Theatre Company always chooses transformational stories to tell children from the stage, the wonderful tale of Sylvester seemed a perfect fit.”

— Enchantment Theatre Company

Making Curricular Connections!

Language Arts: Children’s Literature, reading, storytelling

Arts: theater, music, dance, visual arts (animation and the original Steig drawings), pantomime

21st Century skills: imagination, problem-solving, creativity

Students’ lives: adventures, magic

What is it?

Some stories take place in the big city, and some stories take place in – Oatsdale. If you’re familiar with the children’s classic *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, then you know Oatsdale already, which is to say you’ve dwelt for a time in the imaginative world of William Steig. The central character in this work, as perhaps you’ll recall, is a donkey – winsome and young – who in picking up a shiny red pebble comes quickly to learn of its magical properties. He’s thrilled at first. After all, he can turn the rain on and off like water from the tap. And when threatened by the ravings of a hungry lion (Steig’s imagination was not a uniformly sunny place) he’s initially over the moon to discover that he can transform himself into a rock and so escape those slobbering leonine jaws. Relief turns to dismay, however, when in losing contact with the pebble, he finds its power to return him to his original state is similarly out of reach. What to do?

Some stories sit on the page. Some roam our imaginations. And some spring to life upon the stage. Enchantment Theatre Company facilitates this last approach with some of its trademark elements. First, there are the masks. Each actor – following a tradition that extends at least as far back as the Greeks – wears a mask which seems somehow in keeping with storybook illustration. Then, too, there are puppets, life size ones. Behind the performers, the scenery (some of it animated) comes blazingly to life via projections on a screen. And who peoples this colorful stage? Why, the eponymous donkey, of course, but also dancing squirrels, comic dogs, and a trio of duck puppets. Oh and if you’re a fan of dream sequences (a staple of music theater since at least Laurie’s *Dream in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Carousel*) there’s one thrown in here for good effect. Music? Well, we’ve tipped our hand when we mentioned dancing, so yes, music abounds. And what a kaleidoscope of styles! Everything from blues and jazz to romantic rhapsody – and even some classic rock! It’s quite a journey we take with Sylvester as he answers the question: how can I get back to my *true* self?

Who Is It?

In much the way that Sylvester belongs to Oatsdale, so Enchantment Theatre Company is a product of Philadelphia. Founded at the beginning of this century as a non profit arts organization, it has concerned itself with producing theater versions of beloved works from the children's literary canon. The company's directors, who bring thirty-plus years of experience to the endeavor, use specific elements that have come to define an Enchantment Theatre Company production. Masked actors. Puppets. Inventive magical effects. Projected images. Mime. On this last point, noted Philadelphia-area school administrator Dennis W. Creedon writes:

By its use of the art of pantomime, it enables students from all language backgrounds to fully participate in the theatrical experience. In so doing, it breaks down the barriers between students of different heritages and aids in the process of building a vibrant learning community.

Celebrating its tenth season, Enchantment Theatre Company has performed all over the globe, including extensively in the Far East – where we can imagine the masks resonate greatly for the Japanese and their *Noh* and *Kyogen* theatre. In addition to productions like the one under consideration here, the company also shares the stage with symphony orchestras in performances that pair great music with great stories. And on home turf, the organization partners its season of offerings with an arts education program entitled The Magic of Masks.

William Steig – from Brooklyn – enjoyed a very interesting career trajectory. Beginning in the Depression, he created and sold drawings – both comic and frankly rather dark – to various magazines. Chief among these was the *New Yorker*. Just imagine, over the course of his long association with that worthy publication his illustrations graced the cover well over a hundred times! For the inside pages he turned out in excess of 1600 drawings! Often these were reproduced later in book form. Somewhere along the way a colleague suggested he try his hand at children's books. And so he did – when he was already in his 60s. (Who says there are no second acts in American lives?) He turned out twenty-five of these before passing away in 2003. *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* gained him the prestigious Caldecott Award, and *Shrek* – well, you know what happened with that one.

“Enchantment Theatre Company exists to create original theater for young audiences ... through the imaginative telling of stories that inspire, challenge, and enrich.” — from Enchantment Theatre Company mission statement

What Are Its Contexts?

Seeing that masks are a defining feature of Enchantment Theatre Company's oeuvre – and this work of art in particular – let's take a look at how theater has used, and continues to use, them.

You may already know that Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes (and their ilk) wrote magnificent plays which still speak to us today. These works – *Oedipus Rex* and *The Frogs* among them – were given in huge amphitheaters. Of course the Greeks were more than just a little savvy when it came to acoustics. But even so, an assist was needed when it came to projecting words across those vast expanses. And so the masks that each actor wore came replete with gaping mouths behind which a structure rather like a brass megaphone was attached. Nifty?

Besides the Greeks, other cultures have made much of masks. The Australians developed masks so massive they

covered the wearer's entire body! On the other end of the spectrum, female storytellers in the Inuit tradition use finger masks to help convey the characters in a story. And then, of course, it's not just theater that has made use of masks. Rituals across the whole range of times and localities – in religious and other communal observances – are pasted over liberally with masks of every sort.

The word *mask* itself may derive from the Latin *masculus*. And consider the French word *masque*. Not only does it refer to the thing one wears, but to a certain kind of theatrical divertissement as well.

Proceeding on to other traditions of masked theater, let's turn our attention now to Japan. Although the more modern form of theater, *Kabuki*, relies on exaggerated facial paint, older forms like *Noh* and its satirical cousin *Kyogen* always used masks and continue to do so today. Since the actor (men only, alas) must wear his mask throughout the entire performance, it's important that it be of lightweight construction. These works of art (for truly they are just that in their beauty and sophistication) are stylized to represent, depending on who is being characterized, a god, a man, a madman, a woman, or a devil. These categories, by the way, contain many subdivisions – so you can just imagine the subtleties inherent in each mask – and the degree of knowledge required of the audience in decoding their precise meaning. Is it not lovely when art demands something of us besides passive amusement?

Like the Japanese, other cultures employed masks in traditional theater. The Italians routinely masked Harlequin, Columbine, and the other merry creatures of *Commedia dell'Arte*.

If we advance forward, however, we encounter a liberal use of masks in theater traditions closer to our own time. The 20th Century is rife with examples. Theater artists were quite interested in throwing out the old and giving birth to the new. Among the accoutrement of "the old" was naturalism in acting. Out with it! - said Edward Gordon Craig in his seminal publication *A Note On Masks* (1910) – and let's explore masks and other devices to shake up the status quo. What he had to say resonated with artists in the rough and tumble world of theater in the thirties and forties. Brecht, for one, was listening. So, too, were Cocteau and Genet. Still closer to our own era, French physical theater guru Jacques LeCoq found in masks an intriguing new direction. For him, they held less interest as visual elements impacting an audience's sense of things than as devices affecting how actors who wore them moved. LeCoq's influence is still quite widely felt today throughout the stages of Europe. In America, however, masks in theater have made fewer inroads and more slowly. Companies like Guerrilla Theatre and Enchantment Theatre Company are helping change that.

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

masks in theater
children's literature
William Steig

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

Line of Inquiry How does Enchantment Theatre Company, harnessing "Sylvester" to masks and puppets, lead the beloved story from page to stage?*

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

Ask: What do we know about masks? Assemble a list on the board. What about mime? Make a separate list.

Discussion: Recalling one of the stories from curriculum, if we were going to act this story out using masks and miming the action – with a minimum of spoken word – how could we do that? What kinds of masks would we need? How could we make them from the materials we have here? What kinds of things need to be drawn onto the masks? What features? What characteristics? (For example, kindly, ferocious, regal.)

Pairs: Choose 2 characters – one for each of you – from our story. Together, create a list of descriptions of each character – anything at all that will help you think about what the masks could look like.

Next: referring to your list of character descriptions, create a mask for your character. (Note to teacher: Michael's or other art supplies stores may have pre-cut mask shapes, which would simplify things.)

Place masks next to lists of describing words.

Gallery Walk: students visit each mask in pairs, describing what they see.

Brief whole group discussion: What did you see?

Context: Share a tidbit or two about the use of masks in theater.

Table groups: Next time, using your masks, you will select a scene from our story to act out, miming and with a minimum of spoken word. Take a few moments now to come up with some plans.

After coming to the theater, students could research these:

Mime
children's theater
puppets

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? Describe the masks? How were these used? What about puppets? How was magic represented? What were the different events in the plot? How was music used? How did the performers interrelate? What emotions were conveyed – 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 Enchantment Theatre Company's work? Continue to develop those plans – and then get up and try them out. Your charge: act out your scene from our story using your masks, mime, and a minimum of speaking. If you want to add in a puppet, consider how you might do that – and why – and then quickly create one. Rehearse so you can remember what you've done.

Perform these. Ask open-ended questions about characterizations, mask use, puppetry, humor, music, etc.

Individuals: Take a few quiet minutes to write: What are the advantages and limitations of using masks in theater?

"We focus on timeless stories that involve personal transformation to demonstrate that the possibility for change and redemption exists in each of our lives.

— from Enchantment Theatre Company mission statement

What do you think?

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

How was the stage space utilized?

How were different levels explored?

What especially struck you about the costumes?

What did the masks accomplish – and how?

What are the different elements of physicality the actors used to bring the characters to life?

How else did they create characters?

How were story elements like conflict and resolution used?

What was funny to you – and why?

What would you say about the pacing of the show?

When was music used – and how?

What other elements contributed to the theatrical nature of the presentation?

What are some of the themes in this work?

What props were used and how?

What new ideas about theater did you come away with?

Internet

Teaching Philosophy in Sylvester:

http://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/wiki/Sylvester_and_the_Magic_Pebble

Wonderful site with clear suggestions for engaging students in discussions of Sylvester and its philosophical underpinnings.

Teacher's guide to Sylvester:

teacher.scholastic.com/products/.../sylvester_and.the_magic_pebble.pdf

<http://www.historyforkids.org/scienceforkids/physics/space/bigbang.htm>

Curricular connections:

http://www.homeschoolshare.com/sylvester_and_the_magic_pebble.php

Some helpful ideas on how to link Sylvester with, among other areas, math and language arts.

Author Study: William Steig:

<http://ethemes.missouri.edu/themes/908>

Masks in Noh Theater:

<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/nohmask.html>

Lesson in Greek Theater Masks:

<http://www.princetonol.com/groups/iad/lessons/middle/Cathy-Greek.htm>

Short History of Theater for children:

<http://library.thinkquest.org/5291/history.html>

Books

Sylvester and the Magic Pebble

By William Steig

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing (October 25, 2005)

ISBN-10: 1416902066

On Stage: Theater Games and Activities for Kids

By: Lisa Bany-Winters

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Chicago Review Press; 1st edition (November 1, 1997)

ISBN-10: 1556523246

A varied and interesting assortment of theater games that will stimulate the imagination and get young thespians ready to perform on stage.

Making Masks (Kids Can Do It)

By: Renee Schwarz

Reading level: Ages 9-12

Publisher: Kids Can Press (August 1, 2002)

ISBN-10: 1550749315

The step-by-step instructions in this book in the Kids Can Do It series make the 13 unique masks featured a snap to create and decorate.

"[Enchantment Theatre Company] aids language and literacy education by engaging students in visual and textual experiences that bring stories to life." —Dennis W. Creedon, Arts administrator