

# Crabgrass Puppet Theatre

## Anansi, Spiderman of Africa! *A Tangled Web of Trickster Tales*

### Study Guide

**CRABGRASS PUPPET THEATRE'S** shows are aimed at educating as well as entertaining our audiences. School performances include a special demonstration of the puppets and techniques we use. This study guide provides background information about the show, and suggestions for classroom activities.

#### **Anansi the Trickster**

Tricksters are found in every folklore tradition; famous tricksters include Raven and Coyote in the Native American tradition, Brer Rabbit in African-American stories, and Bugs Bunny in Twentieth-Century American culture. The Trickster, who recognizes neither good nor evil, is important because his actions remind us of our own sense of right and wrong. The very idea of Trickster is ridiculous, because his antics represent what sane and mature people do not do.

Anansi is one of the classic trickster characters in world folklore. He is sometimes heroic, sometimes foolish, and often has supernatural powers. Anansi stories are found in many regions of Africa, but they are especially popular with the **Ashanti** people in **West Africa**. The Ashanti people live in several countries of West Africa, including **Ghana** and **Mali**. Stories about Anansi are so well-known in West Africa that all stories are called **anansesem**, or spider tales.

African trickster stories often concern proper behavior, which is especially important for people who live closely together in a community. Anansi puts his own wishes and desires ahead of the good of the community, and therefore, he often ends up exiled from the community. Anansi is not only a clever trickster, but also a clown, a buffoon, and foolish. He is so lazy and greedy that he will go to outrageous lengths to avoid working and to

get food. He thinks he is clever (and he is), but in many stories, he gets the worst of his own tricks!

In some Anansi stories, he is a man who can change into a spider. In some, he is a spider with human characteristics, and this is the way we have chosen to represent him.

#### **African Storytelling**

Storytelling is a very important part of life in West Africa, and storytellers are respected people in their communities. Stories were told when the sun went down and people could no longer work. Because the stories are passed down through the generations, these folk tales are considered gifts from ancestors. Songs were an integral part of the stories; each story had a special song that was sung before it. Listeners could tell from the song which story was about to be told. Many of these songs have been forgotten, but fortunately, many of the stories survived. When the Africans were kidnapped and brought to the Americas and the Caribbean as slaves, they brought their stories with them. Anansi can be found in the United States, and in Haiti and Jamaica, where he is sometimes called Annancy, Nancy or Aunt Nancy.

## Puppets

Most of the puppets in *Anansi, Spiderman of Africa!* are based on puppets from the West African country of **Mali**. They are very simple **rod puppets**, with heads mounted on rods (sticks) that we hold, and strings that we pull to move their arms up and down. Traditional Malian puppets are carved out of wood. Instead of carving ours from wood, we sculpted them out of thick paper, and then covered them with cloth that has been soaked in glue. When the cloth dries, we have a good, durable puppet head that we can paint. The process is something like paper mache, but the cloth is in one piece rather than in many small pieces.

We also use one **hand puppet** in this show: the turtle.

## Music

All of the music is performed and recorded by the Crabgrass Puppet Theatre. The music of Africa has spread widely throughout the world. The soundtrack to *Anansi, Spiderman of Africa!* includes traditional West African melodies and rhythms as well as African-inspired tunes from the Caribbean and the US.

## About Crabgrass Puppet Theatre

Jamie Keithline and Bonny Hall are the **Crabgrass Puppet Theatre**. They have been working together since 1982, creating puppet shows and performing them around the country. Jamie and Bonny lived in San Francisco and performed in California when they first started their company. In 1989, they moved to Connecticut. Jamie and Bonny not only perform all of their shows, but they design and build all of the puppets and sets, write the scripts, and record the soundtracks.

## Suggestions for Classroom Activities

### Art: Block printing:

We used block-printing and stamping techniques to create some of the costumes and scenery in our show. The Ashanti people use stamps called **Adinkra** to decorate fabric. Each Adinkra symbol stands for something (somewhat akin to hieroglyphics). With older children, have them research Adinkra symbols, and create their own stamps using potatoes or sponges. Younger children can sponge-print or potato-print basic shapes to promote the concept of printing on paper or fabric.

### Language Arts/Writing:

Some of the Anansi stories are **how-and-why stories**, stories that are made up to explain why things are the way they are. Most cultures have stories like these. What other how-why-stories can you find? Write your own how-and-why story: for example, why the giraffe has a long neck, or why the spider has eight legs.

### Writing:

Write letters to the puppeteers about the show. What did you enjoy most? (Feedback from teachers is also welcome!) Send letters to:

Crabgrass Puppet Theatre  
c/o Encore Performing Arts  
P.O. Box 630  
Melville, NY 11747

### Discussion:

How is live performance different from television, or from a sporting event? How should you act in a performance? If you were giving a performance, how would you want the audience to behave? See our section on Audience Behavior below.

### **Dramatic Arts:**

Read other Anansi stories and find one to dramatize. Divide the students into several groups: one can learn and act out the story, one can create and/or use their bodies to become the scenery, and one group can be responsible for music and sound effects. If possible, use instruments that are used in Africa, such as thumb pianos, marimbas, flutes and drums.

### **Geography:**

Find Ghana and Mali on a map or globe (hint: they are in West Africa). Look in the library for books about this region. How do people live? What do they eat and what do they wear?

### **Music:**

Listen to music from West Africa. How is this music different from other music you listen to?

### **Computer skills:**

Visit us on the web at  
[www.crabgrasspuppets.com](http://www.crabgrasspuppets.com)

### **Recommended Books**

Aardema, Verna, **Misoso**, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1994.

Kimmel, Eric A., **Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock**, Holiday House, New York, 1988.

Arkhurst, Joyce Cooper, **The Adventures of Spider: West African Folktales**, Little, Brown & Co., 1964

Addo, Peter Eric Adotey, **How the Spider Became Bald: Folktales and Legends from West Africa**, Morgan Reynolds Inc., Greensboro, NC, 1993

Courlander, Harold, and Herzog, George, **The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories**, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1947.

Appiah, Peggy, **Tales of an Ashanti Father**, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1967.

## **Audience behavior**

Many children do not have much experience with live performance, and do not understand that live performance is different from a sports event, a movie, or television. It can be helpful to discuss audience behavior with them prior to the performance. In addition to the basics (pay attention, don't talk, don't yell out), the following is important:

### **Applauding:**

This is the main way the audience shows its appreciation to the performers. Teachers can explain this prior to the performance, and can lead the way by applauding at the end of stories and at the end of the show.

### **Laughing:**

Laughing is another way of showing appreciation! We are *trying* to make the audience laugh, and sometimes we will visit a school where the teachers quiet the children when they laugh. We *want* them to laugh! Young children may need to be reminded that after they laugh, they need to quiet down again to listen.

### **Is it okay for teachers to laugh?**

YES! We are performing for teachers as well as students, and there is plenty of humor in our shows for adults. Many teachers seem uncomfortable laughing in a school performance, but teachers' laughter does several important things. Overall, it shows the children that the teachers are paying attention to and enjoying the performance, which elevates the children's interest. It also raises the children's understanding of more sophisticated humor: when teachers laugh at something the children didn't find funny at first, the children often realize that it *was* funny, and we get a second wave of laughter. The most enjoyable performances we give are the ones in which both teachers and students are engaged and responding.

## **Teachers: please be courteous to the performers!**

We're well aware of how overworked and short of time most teachers are these days. But if teachers are correcting papers or carrying on conversations during a performance, they are unable to become involved in the performance, discuss it with their students afterwards, or set an example for the children by responding and applauding at the correct times. We are visiting more and more schools in which the teachers talk to each other during our shows; this sets a terrible example for the students, and makes it very difficult for us as performers. Teachers would definitely not appreciate it if we came into their classrooms while they were teaching and talked throughout the lesson . . .

### **For More Information:**

To learn more about Crabgrass Puppet Theatre and our shows, please visit us on the web at [www.crabgrasspuppets.com](http://www.crabgrasspuppets.com).

To bring Crabgrass Puppet Theatre to your school, please contact:

Encore Performing Arts  
P.O. Box 630  
Melville, NY 11747  
800 669-9850  
email: [info@encoreperforming.com](mailto:info@encoreperforming.com)