

Crabgrass Puppet Theatre

The Day It Snowed Tortillas

Study Guide

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

SYNOPSIS OF THE SHOW

A poor couple, Pedro and Rosa, are almost out of food. Pedro sets off to gather palm fronds so that Rosa can weave baskets from them to sell. Pedro discovers a bag of gold, and takes it home to Rosa. Rosa realizes that Pedro, who cannot keep a secret, will eventually tell someone about the gold, and she comes up with a plan to deal with that situation. She sends Pedro to the store for a bag of cornmeal so that she can make tortillas. While Pedro is sleeping, Rosa makes dozens and dozens of tortillas, and throws them outside the house.

When Pedro wakes up, he thinks the tortillas have fallen from the sky; obviously it has snowed tortillas! He is amazed; he never heard of it snowing tortillas before. "You didn't know it can snow tortillas? You need to get educated. I'm sending you to school," says Rosa. She gives him directions to the school, and Pedro sets off. Pedro doesn't do very well in school, and decides to leave. On his way back home, he encounters two bandits, who are looking for the gold. When they ask him about it, he tells them that yes, he found the gold and took it home. But when they get home to Rosa, she has it all figured out, and the bandits have to leave empty-handed.

ABOUT THE STORY

"The Day It Snowed Tortillas" is a **folk tale** that comes from the Mexican-American border region. Folk tales are stories that have been told for a long time, often hundreds of years. They have been told from generation to generation and passed down from parents to children. Because the stories have been told by so many people over the years, they often change. When people started "collecting" stories (writing them down and publishing them), there was a record of at least one way of telling the stories.

The version of "The Day It Snowed Tortillas" that we adapted for our show was collected by a storyteller named Joe Hayes, who heard it from a little girl in one of his classes. "The Day It Snowed Tortillas" is a Mexican-American folk tale, but, like a lot of other folk tales, some of the elements (such as claiming that food has fallen from the sky) are found in stories from other cultures.

RECOMMENDED READING

The Day It Snowed Tortillas / El Dia Que Nevaron Tortillas, Folktales told in Spanish and English, by Joe Hayes, Cinco Puntos Press 2004

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, and in 2001, to Vermont. 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.

In 2001, Crabgrass Puppet Theatre was awarded a **Citation for Excellence in the Art of Puppetry** from the American Center of the Union Internationale de la Marionette, the highest honor in American puppetry, for their production of **Anansi, Spiderman of Africa**. In 2004 they were again honored, this time for **The Bremen Town Musicians**.

ABOUT THE PUPPETS

The puppets in this show are **rod puppets**. Rod puppets are puppets that are moved with sticks (rods). Our puppet stage has two parts to it: the **playboard**, which is higher, and the **tabletop**, which is lower. The rod puppets we use on the playboard have one main rod that goes up to the head and supports the body. The hands have rods attached to them so that we can manipulate (move) the arms. The tabletop rod puppets have a large rod inside the chest that we use to move body around, and turn the head. They also have short rods on the arms.

ABOUT THE COSTUMES

The puppets wear versions of traditional Mexican clothing. Rosa wears an embroidered shirt and skirt. Pedro wears overalls. The bandits wear very fancy suits, which are most often seen these days on mariachi musicians. All of the men wear wide-brimmed hats called sombreros.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

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, Inc.
P.O. Box 630
Melville, NY 11747

Geography/Map Skills

Find Mexico on a map or a globe. Is it larger or smaller than the United States? Look particularly at the border between Mexico and Texas – that is where this story comes from!

What is the climate of Mexico? What is the landscape like? Look to see what other countries Mexico borders.

Music and Dance

El Jarabe Tapatio was named the National Folk Dance of Mexico in 1924. Do you know which dance this is? Here's a hint – it involves a large hat!

There are many different styles of music played in Mexico, using many different kinds of instruments. Play a tape or CD of some traditional Mexican music and try to identify some of the instruments.

Discussion

Do any of your classmates have ancestors or relatives from Mexico? Has anyone in your class been to Mexico?

Many men in Mexico wear special hats called sombreros. Pedro and the bandits wear sombreros in our show. Why do you think they wear such large hats?

Has anyone in your class ever made a tortilla, or watched one being made? What are the ingredients? How do you cook it?

Science

Our show features two animals that are very common in Mexico and in the border region. Use the library or the internet to find information on animals, plants and reptiles from Mexico. What can you find out about armadillos? What kinds of trees do they have? What kind of cactus?

Holidays

Cinco de Mayo is a Mexican holiday which is celebrated on the fifth of May (that is what Cinco de Mayo means). Find out how Mexicans and Mexican-Americans celebrate Cinco de Mayo, and why. What foods do they eat? What clothes do they wear?

What are some other holidays celebrated by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans?

Reading and Discussion: Adapting Folktales

When the Crabgrass Puppet Theatre creates a new show, sometimes we write the whole show out of our own imaginations, and sometimes we **adapt** stories someone else has written. When we adapt stories, we often change them somewhat to make them work better for the puppet theatre. Not every story can work as a puppet show, no matter how good the story is. Just about everyone who makes a movie or play makes changes in the original story; for example, the movie of "The Wizard of Oz" is very different from the books by L. Frank Baum, and the movie of "Aladdin" is also very different from the original story. Read "The Day It Snowed Tortillas" as it is told by Joe Hayes. What changes did we make in the story? What is different about our show? Is there a chicken in Joe Hayes's version? An armadillo? Why do you think we made these changes?

Art

When we design our puppets (decide how we want them to look), we often choose a style that is not realistic. We don't want our puppets to look exactly like miniature

human beings and animals – we don't think that is very interesting.

For this show, we looked at Mexican **folk art** (art and crafts made by native people, often people without much art training who have learned their craft from their parents or relatives). Mexico, especially the region of Oaxaca (Oh-HAWK-uh), has a wonderful tradition of ceramic folk art figures. Some of the figures are of people, some are animals, and some are fantastical creatures that don't exist in the real world. They all use very bright colors. We liked these figures so much that we decided to use them as a jumping-off point for the design of our puppets.

Find some pictures of Mexican folk art figures. What makes them different from dolls and artwork from other areas? Create some of your own using play dough; the bright colors are perfect for this.

Think about the styles that the Disney artists used in "Aladdin" and "Cinderella," and how they are different from the styles used in the movie of "James and the Giant Peach" or the TV show, "Roly Poly Ollie." Look at books that have different styles of illustration. Try drawing the same thing in two different styles.

Make a comic-strip mural of our show, with each person drawing one thing that happened. Put them up on the wall (in order!) and see if you have the whole show!

Library Skills

Visit your school or town library and see what books it has about Mexico. Look for books about Mexican clothes, food, houses, animals, and plants.

Look in your library for other stories from Mexico. You might even find some stories about tortillas!

AUDIENCE BEHAVIOR:

Many children do not have much experience with live performance, and do not understand how 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 students 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 to what comes next.

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. 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 are 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.

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