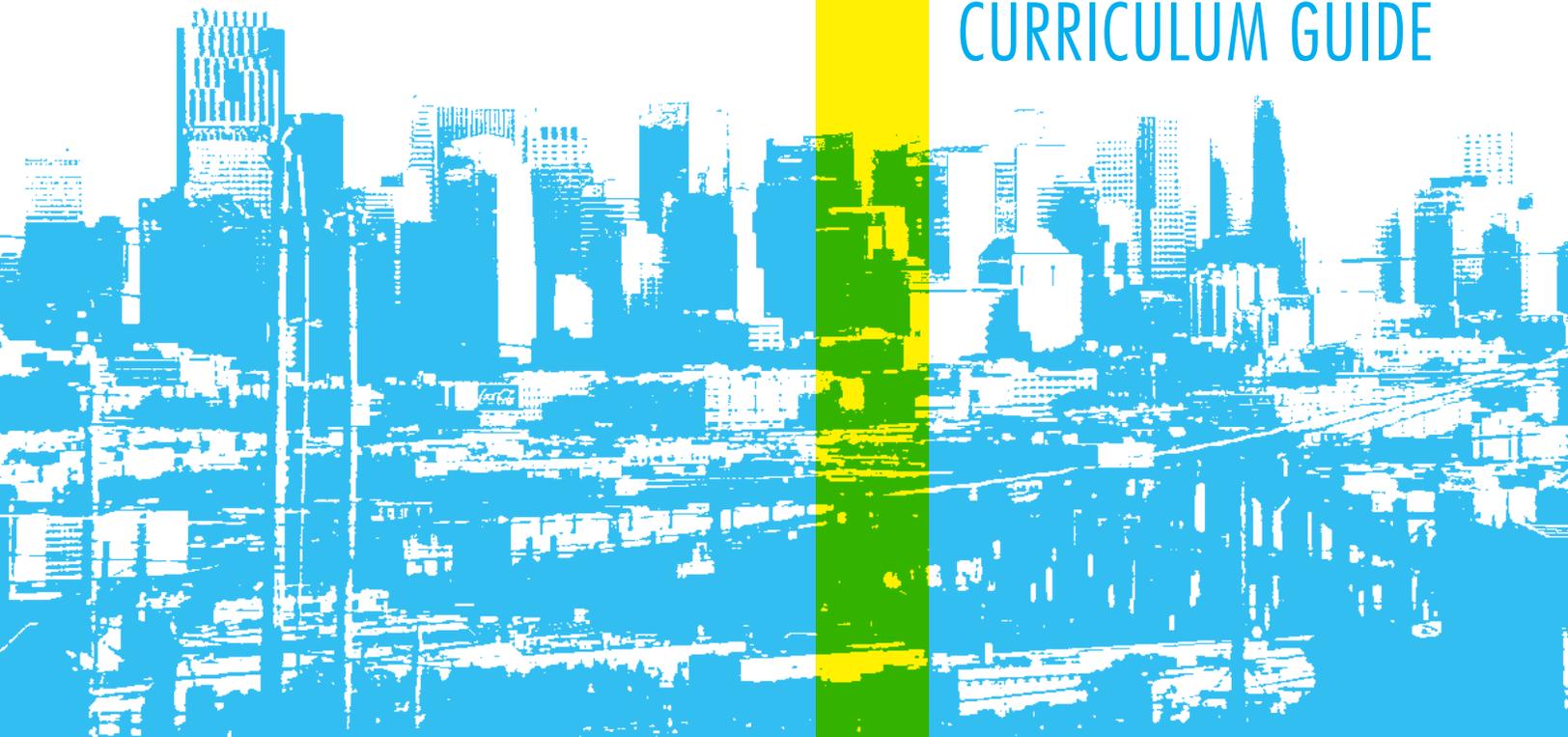


STAGE LEFT

THE SAN FRANCISCO MIME TROUPE & PICKLE FAMILY CIRCUS
CURRICULUM GUIDE





Tartuffe, SF Mime Troupe. Photo: Bernard Weiner

OVERVIEW

This guide is designed to accompany the segments of *STAGE LEFT* about the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Pickle Family Circus (time code below). These two companies used the “popular” forms of Commedia dell’Arte and circus to address political issues and serve the broader community. And both companies challenged traditional ideas about who had access to theater, where theater was presented, and how a theater company should be structured.

BACKGROUND & HISTORICAL CONTEXT

History of Commedia dell’Arte and Circus

The San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Pickle Family Circus both use what are called “popular theater”-- forms that tap into universal human truths as they entertain the public -- to convey social messages. Both of these forms have a long history.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe uses Commedia dell’Arte, a type of physical comedy developed in 16th and 17th century Italy. Commedia pokes fun at societal values by using exaggerated performance styles and insightful character traits, specifically through its “stock” characters, or a group of characters that represented human archetypes, or models of behavior. Each character had a set of gestures and ways of moving and talking that distinguished them. Commedia performers used their art form to share insights into politics and human nature with their audiences. Commedia troupes performed outdoors in city and town piazzas, or central squares, on stages they brought with them in horse-drawn carts, along with their props, costumes, and sets.

The circus has its roots in the Roman Empire, when audiences came to see exotic animals, which then spread throughout Europe. Commedia dell’Arte, along with the art of mime and the tradition of court jesters, used comedy to address issues that were otherwise taboo. Commedia dell’Arte influenced

SF MIME TROUPE & PICKLES CURRICULUM GUIDE

the evolution of one of the most important elements of the modern circus: clowns. Underlying the physical comedy of clowns is an examination of human frailties and societal values. Like the court jesters and commedia characters before them, clowns use humor to draw attention to address topics they wouldn't dare address if they played it "straight." Clowning, combined with the acrobatics of the circus, is an art form that audiences of all ages and walks of life can enjoy and relate to.

Historical context: the 1960s and 1970s in San Francisco

The San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Pickle Family Circus were founded during the countercultural movement, which coincided with significant societal shifts happening during the 1960s and early 1970s. The civil rights, feminist and gay rights movements brought with them new visions for an egalitarian and pluralistic society, a celebration of sexual freedom, and questioning of long-held American traditions and values. The Vietnam War and the protest movement against it politicized many young people.

San Francisco was the heart of the counterculture movement, where people radically questioned the conventions and norms of the time and experimented with collective living, progressive political action, altered states and free sexuality.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe

The San Francisco Mime Troupe was founded by R.G. Davis in 1959. Davis' idea was to go against all of the traditional rules about theater, and to use art to change the world. One of the most radical aspects of the Mime Troupe was that it took its theatrical creations directly to the working class public through free performances in the parks. In 1963, the San Francisco Recreation and Park Commission denied the Mime Troupe a permit to perform, on the grounds of "obscenity." The Mime Troupe won the court case that followed, which established the right of artists to perform uncensored in San Francisco's parks, which the group has done every year since that time.

In 1965, the Mime Troupe created *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel*, using the racist form of "blackface" to expose and attack Americans' deeply held racist beliefs. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee sponsored performances around the country, and Mime Troupe members were arrested a number of times. When R.G. Davis left the company in 1970, it became a collective, where all members had equal decision-making power.

In 1974, the company adopted an affirmative action policy to become a multiracial ensemble; in the mid-1990s, the Troupe adopted a similar policy to become multigenerational.

In the 1990s, the Mime Troupe created the Youth Theater Project, which aimed to help at-risk youth create and perform plays about their lives. For decades, the company has also run an intensive summer training program for theater artists and others interested in learning the Mime Troupe's unique performance style. This workshop is offered at almost no cost; instead participants offer work exchange by helping the Troupe with its free performances in the parks.



Pickle Family Circus. Photo: Kimi Okada.

The Pickle Family Circus

The Pickle Family Circus was founded in 1974 by two members of the San Francisco Mime Troupe who wanted to blend the populist and satirical aspects of the Mime Troupe with a more lighthearted performance style. The Circus was part of several movements in circus and performance: Contemporary Circus and New Vaudeville. Contemporary Circus, exemplified by Montreal's Cirque du Soleil, focused on human performers rather than animals, and placed more emphasis on character, theme and story. New Vaudeville was a revival of the popular variety performances of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The main principle of the Pickle Family Circus was to provide the public with free entertainment that focused more on supporting community organizations and reaching audiences with their "counterculture humor" than with an overt political message. The structure of the Circus had three key elements: collective decision-making, shared offstage tasks by all Circus members, and equal pay. In 1984, the Pickles, as they were called, started the San Francisco School of Circus Arts, which was revamped in 1993 and named the New Pickle Family Circus.

At the same time that the Pickle Family Circus was performing, Make a Circus was engaging San Francisco's low-income communities in creating participatory circuses. The two circus companies shared several of their performers, including well-known artists Geoff Hoyle, Bill Irwin and Joan Mankin.

PRE-VIEWING ACTIVITIES

1. Introduce the theatrical forms of Commedia dell'Arte and circus to students (for additional context, have students view the audiovisual resources in this guide). Ask them to consider the following question as they watch the *STAGE LEFT* segment:

SF MIME TROUPE & PICKLES CURRICULUM GUIDE

- What aspects or characteristics of Commedia dell'Arte and circus help the San Francisco Mime Troupe and the Pickle Family Circus address socially-minded themes, such as racism or class inequality?
2. Review the history of the 1960s and 1970s in San Francisco with students, and show them the following video about the 1960s Counterculture movement from the PBS Series, Making Sense of the Sixties: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF__TRVD3dQ. Ask them to consider the following question as they watch the STAGE LEFT segment:
 - How did the structures and working methods of these two groups reflect what was happening in U.S. society during the 1960s and 1970s?

POST-VIEWING REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does the choice of where a theatrical performance takes place affect its impact?
2. In what ways did these companies demonstrate that artists can contribute to social change? How did they influence what people in their audiences think or believe?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Audiovisuals:

Excerpts of Stage Left

<http://stageleft-movie.com/educators/excerpts/>

San Francisco Mime Troupe - Stage Left

<https://vimeo.com/53195101>

Pickle Family Circus - Stage Left

<https://vimeo.com/53195186>

Webites:

Stage Left

<http://stageleft-movie.com>

Interactive timeline of Bay Area theater history

<http://stageleft-movie.com/timeline/>

Resources about Commedia dell'Arte and Circus:

List of Commedia stock characters and their characteristics

<http://shane-arts.com/commedia-stock-characters.htm>

SF MIME TROUPE & PICKLES CURRICULUM GUIDE

Introduction to Commedia dell'Arte Stock characters
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_OTAXWt8hY

About learning the art of clowning
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZ57_prZ9e4

Example of a clown act in Cirque du Soleil
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yV4G-nWVPOc&feature=related>

Resources about the San Francisco Mime Troupe:

A history of the San Francisco Mime Troupe
<http://www.sfmt.org/company/history.php>

KQED SPARK segment about the SF Mime Troupe
<http://www.kqed.org/arts/programs/spark/profile.jsp?essid=26378>

SF Mime Troupe's YouTube playlist
<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL08A6B16847DB1339&feature=plcp>

THEATER ACTIVITIES

Commedia dell'Arte

Prep Activity: Ask students to walk around the room at their own pace, paying attention to how they move: is there a certain part of their body they lead with? Hips, knees, head? Then prompt students to move around the room leading with different body parts (chest, stomach, nose, chin, toes, forehead, hand, finger). Ask students to reflect on the activity, particularly what changes they noticed in themselves for different body parts.

Commedia Characters: Share/review the audiovisual resources about the Commedia dell'arte stock characters. Have students try out the physical characteristics, vocal qualities and stock gestures of several or all of the characters. Have them identify people in their lives who resemble these characters as they learn them.

Commedia Scene: Break students into pairs and assign them two stock characters. Ask them to decide on the basics of a scene: setting (where is the scene going to take place) and problem (a difficulty the characters will face in the scene). Then have students create a short scene to perform for their peers. Ask students watching the scenes what they notice about the relationships between the characters and how that reflects relationships they see in their communities.

Clowning

Prep Activity: Ask each student to think of a solo scene they can perform where they try to use an object or machine (possibilities are endless: it could be as simple as a pencil and as complicated as

SF MIME TROUPE & PICKLES CURRICULUM GUIDE

a kitchen appliance), but the object doesn't work. As each student performs his/her scene, side coach them to continue to "stick with the problem," even though the object continues to be broken.

Status Game: Break students into groups of four. Choose four subsequent numbers from a deck of playing cards. Have them choose a setting, and then hand them each a card, making sure that they alone see the number on it. Explain to the students that the person with the highest number has the highest status, and each subsequent number has lower status. Then have the students improvise a short scene, asking them to react to their fellow players and try to determine what their status is relative to the others. Have students watching describe what they noticed.

"In" clowns and "out" clowns: Watch this short video clip about learning the art of clowning: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZ57_prZ9e4. Then have students make a list of qualities of people they know in their school or community (but not specific people) and divide the list into "in" and "out." Then have each student focus on one of these qualities and explore that quality further, using what they have learned from the Commedia exercises and status game. Then pair students and have them improvise a scene, establishing a setting and problem first. Ask students in the audience to describe what they noticed, particularly focusing on the social dynamics of the scene.

Exposing social issues through physical comedy: Once students are comfortable with the basics of commedia and clowning, divide them into groups of three or four and ask them to choose a "burning issue" that affects their community (the term "burning issue" is used by the Mime Troupe to identify the topics and themes of their plays). Have them map out the setting, problem and key characters for the scene, determine which commedia characters would best personify the characters, and then create a short scene that addresses/exposes the "burning issue."

REFLECTION FRAMEWORK

Prior to facilitating these activities with students, it may help to familiarize them with the theater terms in the toolbox, as well as reviewing the following framework for having students reflect on and analyze other students' performances.

After students watch their peers' performances, ask them the three following questions:

1. What do you see or hear? Have students be as objective and neutral as possible, focusing on what is clearly observable or audible.
2. What do you think or feel based on what you see and hear?
3. What questions do you have/what more do you want to know?

Many of the exercises also provide specific topics for students to reflect upon after watching the performance.

Setting: When and where a scene or drama takes place.

Problem (also known as Dramatic Conflict): A difficult or challenging situation tied to the central plot of a dramatic work. This problem can be inner (a character struggles with him/herself), relational (when two characters want different or opposing things), societal (when characters are struggling against societal oppression or injustice), or situational (a character or characters are in conflict with a specific situation).

Improvisation: When an actor or actors spontaneously makes up action or dialogue without writing a script first. Some key elements of good improvisation include relationship (working with the other character/s in a scene to move the action forward rather than blocking them, paying close attention to what they are doing and reacting to it); high stakes (the level of risk and reward in the scene's unfolding plot); and strong and detailed choices about what a character should do at any moment in a scene.

Stock character: An archetypical or stereotyped character, usually originating in Roman comedy and finding its widest expression in Commedia dell'arte. Stock characters continue to be used, however, in one form or another and examples include the infatuated lover, the crafty servant, the lazy bum, the greedy businessperson, and the clown.

Side-Coaching: A technique used during theater activities, in which the teacher offers suggestions or comments from the side to advance the scene or keep performers focused on specific elements of the scene.

Popular Theater: Theater that is presented to a broad public audience, with topics and

performance styles designed to be entertaining and accessible to that public.

Presentational Theater: A style of performance where actors acknowledge the audience, whether directly by addressing them or indirectly through a general attitude or specific use of language, looks, gestures or other signs that indicate that the character or actor is aware of the audience's presence.

Commedia Scene: Break students into pairs and assign them two stock characters. Ask them to decide on the basics of a scene: setting (where is the scene going to take place) and problem (a difficulty the characters will face in the scene). Then have students create a short scene to perform for their peers. Ask students watching the scenes what they notice about the relationships between the characters and how that reflects relationships they see in their communities.

Curriculum written by Rebecca Schultz with support from the Kenneth Rainin Foundation

STAGE LEFT Produced by Rapt Productions

Graphic Design by Steve Glanzer

