

WE TELL STORIES

Season of Giving

Art Form: Theatre

Style: Contemporary

Culture: Multicultural

MEET THE ARTIST:

We Tell Stories is a multi-ethnic storytelling troupe founded by theater artist and storyteller Carl Weintraub and led by Artistic Director Diana Tanaka. The group has a threefold purpose: to entertain and educate audiences through the literature and folklore of all times and cultures; to involve them in the process of language and acting as an art form; and to inspire them to plumb the depths and reach the heights of their own creativity. To this end, the group diligently seeks fresh material and performs it with an extemporaneous flavor, encouraging children to participate from their seats, in their minds, and on the stage. In this way, children see themselves as an integral part of the process as they witness and experience the stories' morals, art and the fun. An old trunk filled with props and costumes is the solitary set, and it is the group's hope that the audiences go away saying to themselves, "I could do that!"

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

The Season of Giving celebrates holiday traditions across the globe and throughout time, using themes of Transformation, Enduring Values and the Human Family to explore three tales and a poem. "King Hilary and the Beggarman," a poem by A.A. Milne, tells how fortune brings rewards at Christmastime to an honest beggar and a generous king. "Persephone in Hades" is an ancient Greek myth that explains why the seasons change. "The Gift of the Magi," by O. Henry, is a turn-of-the-century tale about the true nature of gift giving, love and sacrifice. Finally, "The Chanukkah Guest" by Eric A. Kimmel shares the story of a grandmother, Bubba Brayna and her "bear" of a guest. A trio of actors uses the troupe's signature trunk to set the stage and create the magic for each selection, encouraging students to read the materials presented in the performance, or seek out new stories on their own.



We Tell Stories
Photo by Craig Schwartz



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The Season of Giving uses a storytelling format to present literature to children. The purposes and values of storytelling are many.

- ✓ Telling a story is a gift - a shared experience that should bring people closer together.
- ✓ Storytelling introduces books and can motivate the audience to read and explore literature.
- ✓ Storytelling can help teach language skills.
- ✓ Storytelling can help an audience gain insight into motives and patterns of human behavior.
- ✓ Storytelling is a way to keep cultural heritage alive.
- ✓ Hearing stories gives the listeners practice in visualization, the basis of creative imagination.
- ✓ Storytelling brings dramatic joy to the teller and the listener alike.

A good story requires specific characteristics: a single, clearly defined theme; a well-developed plot; style (vivid word pictures, pleasing sounds, rhythm); believable characterizations; an adaptation that is faithful to source material; dramatic appeal; and finally, the story must be appropriate for the listener.

The stories in this performance are reflective of holiday traditions that occur during winter time. Winter in the Northern Hemisphere has always been a time of extreme transition, moving from the warmth and light of fall into the cold and dark of winter. The Winter Solstice (a Latin word meaning "sun stands still") occurs when the sun appears to be at its lowest point in the sky, usually around December 22 in the Northern Hemisphere. The solstice marks the beginning of winter, and was celebrated with bonfires, candles, holly and mistletoe. Many of those traditions were carried over in to the Christian holiday of Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Hanukkah, which also features candles, celebrates enduring faith and the deliverance of a people from suppression. But no matter the holiday, in wintertime all people love to warm themselves by the fire and listen to stories.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Which part of the performance did you like the best? Why? Which story was your favorite?
- What countries, cities, towns, or countryside were the settings for the stories? What time periods or eras were represented?
- Were there customs or traditions that were familiar to you? Were there any that were new to you?
- The actors used costumes and props that were pulled from a trunk. Did they use items in creative and imaginative ways? Were you surprised by the ways they used some of the items?
- Did the stories have any shared themes or ideas? What were they?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS: LANGUAGE ARTS

Find the stories in pictures through these exercises:

Collect a group of pictures of scenic beauty and urban and rural settings without any people in them. Divide the class into small groups of three or four and let each group select a picture to work from. The groups should devise a story specific to the picture they have chosen. Give each group 30 minutes to play and rehearse their stories and then share them with the class.

Draw one setting using most of the blackboard and ask the groups to create stories that would happen in that setting. For example, if you drew a picture of a deserted island with palm trees, the groups might develop stories of shipwrecks, diving expeditions, exotic vacations, etc. Share the stories with the class. Discuss how the same setting can suggest different stories.

Incorporate the following exercise with an art lesson. Ask students to draw, color or paint a setting from their imagination. Use a curricular theme if desired, but settings can be drawn from a scary or safe place, outer space, nature, fantasy, or their own back yard. When they have finished their pictures, have them exchange with someone and perform a short scene based on that artwork.

- Legend:
- ⊗ Artistic perception
 - ❖ Creative expression
 - ▮ Historical & cultural context
 - ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
 - * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⊗ Tell a favorite family holiday tale based on the oral tradition. If possible, interview a family member to be sure that all the details of the story are clear. Remember how the We Tell Stories actors used descriptive, active language, gestures, emotions and props or costumes to make their stories come to life, and try to use some of their techniques in your own storytelling.
- ❖ Divide the class into small groups and give each group three unrelated words to incorporate as an integral part of an original holiday scene. Give the groups 30 minutes to plan the scene, assign the roles, and rehearse the story improvising dialogue and action. Suggestions for word combinations:

mistletoe - horse - sleigh
gift - snow - door knob
frozen pond - lantern - bucket
candle - compass - deck of cards
hot chocolate - teddy bear - boots



- ▮ Focus attention on the map of the world in your classroom. What parts of the world did the stories you heard come from? Identify their points of origin. Did the stories travel a great distance from their homeland countries to your classroom? How far? Are there students in your classroom from these countries? Discuss with students how the stories may have changed as they traveled around the world or across the oceans.
- * Read two or three holiday stories from different cultures and several descriptions of holiday traditions around the world and then discuss them with your class. Story suggestions include:
The Fir Tree, by Hans Christian Andersen
The Night of Las Posadas, by Tomie dePaola
Zlateh the Goat, by Isaac Bashevis Singer

Holiday Traditions could include:

Diwali	India
Las Posadas	Latin America
Kwanzaa	African American
Santa Lucia	Scandinavia

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- Dillon, Susan. *The Scholastic Big Book of Holidays Around the Year*. Scholastic Teaching Resources, New York, NY: 2003.
- Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theatre*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL: 1963.