



Young
Audiences
Arts for
Learning

Massachusetts

Experience. Understand. Create. Connect.

The Mystic Paper Beasts is a mask theatre company that specializes in telling stories from many lands and cultures. The tales told by the Beasts are original and traditional, often mysterious, often amusing, expressed through text with humor and via dance/movement while wearing their witty and whimsical masks. The masks are hand made by Dan Potter, with some help from Marya, and writing and direction of the plays is by Marya Ursin.

Sky Tails is a series of Native American stories having to do with the sky, with beginnings, with flourishings. These performances have delighted audiences of all ages and many nationalities.

Learning Goals (for the performance)

1. To engage the imagination through stories that are mysterious and familiar, unusual and known; to create in the mind links between sky and earth, self and other
2. To expose students to many forms of story telling: mask, puppet, dance, mime, narrative, scroll, music
3. To encourage a reverence for the natural world, and to invite the students to embody the greeting with which the program begins: Mitakuye Oyasin, which means, “we are all related”

Pre-Activity Summary:

The stories told in Sky Tails are:

Wolf and Coyote (Miwok)

Skywoman (Onandaga)

Stealing the Sun (Muskogee, Creek)

Scroll Story: Sun’s Daughter (Cherokee)



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The Great Lacrosse Game (Muskogee, Creek, Menomonee)
Spirit Dog: When the Cornmeal Went Missing (Cherokee)
Flute Romance (Sioux)
Buffalo Woman (Sioux, Lakota)

Areas of study might include:

A. Contextualizing the stories by: Studying the various tribes: where they lived, what their mode of living was, what their stories might be, what their history was. Question: what countries and ethnicities are represented within the class; is anyone in the class part Native American? Reflect on geographies of overlap and of separation.

B. A study of Native American Stories

Many different tribes will have the same, or a similar story. Students might do a comparative study, or might focus on a version of one of these myths to see how the Beasts have altered (usually changed or summarized, or reduced the number of characters) the story, and what elements they have retained.

C. Study of Mask

- a. When worn: Use in various cultures, including our own: e.g. celebration, theatrical, decorative, religious, practical
- b. Where (on the body) worn
- c. Where (in the world) worn
- d. Materials of construction

Curriculum Links:

History, Social Studies, English Language Arts, Visual Arts, Theatre, Movement, Multi-cultural studies, Astronomy, Earth Sciences



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Post Activity Summary

A. Creating

A myth

An earth story

A mask

Creation of one's own Sky Tail, a sort of Kipling exploration of beginnings and reasons why - one's mythic "Just So" story. Most of these stories have to do with a quest, a discovery, a collaboration, a transformation, love. One or more of these elements might be included in the student story.

B. Creation of movement or sequence of movements that will reflect the characters introduced in the students' stories; Acting out one or more of the stories.

C. Creation of a rattle or a drum using tea tins, paper towel tubes, boxes, oatmeal containers, etc., filled with rice, kidney beans, stones, ping pong balls, each creating a different sound.

Summary of Sky Tails

Sky Tails is a series of Native American stories told through mask, dance, puppet, and painted scroll. The performers lay out their props in full view of the audience, and gently link stories from across America in their telling. There are two performers, over 20 masks and puppets, several musical instruments, and a bit of narrative. The final story calls on the audience for volunteer performers. The show runs approximately 45 minutes, and can be followed by a question and answer period. Appropriate for all ages. Lower school will also enjoy this performance and find it accessible to them. Below is a list of the stories briefly told in SkyTails.



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ABOUT THE PERFORMERS:

The Mystic Paper Beasts perform myths of transformation in the whimsical masks for which they have gained renown in and out of the US. They have presented some 700 performances in the past 22 years of collaboration, including such venues as museums (British Museum of Art at Yale, Brooklyn Children's Museum (NYC), Williams College Museum of Art, Discovery Museum (Bridgeport), New Britain Museum of Modern Art, among others), First Nights Boston, Hartford, New Haven, and more; festivals as various as the Ct. Eagle Festival to the Westport Art Festival, parades ranging from the Hallowe'en Parade in NYC to Veterans' Day parades in Westerly, RI; for multiple libraries, schools, festivals, private celebrations throughout New England, Washington DC area, Pennsylvania, Colorado; and Scotland, Wales, England.

The two current primary performers/designers of the company are Daniel Potter and Marya Ursin.

Dan Potter has a BA from Harvard University, a master's degree in Architecture from the Harvard School of Design, and has additionally studied sculpture, painting, and drawing extensively in the USA and in Strasbourg. He shows his work at galleries in NY, Ct., RI, Vietnam, Turkey, Mexico. Marya is his usual curator. He is the primary mask maker for the Beasts, and performs with the company, which he co founded in 1976.

Marya Ursin is the Artistic Director for the Beasts, and is executive director of the Dragon's Egg. She writes and performs for the Beasts, and is a member of the NYC based dance troupe, SITU. She is a trained dancer (Merce Cunningham) and mime (Marcel Marceau), and teaches at the National Theatre Institute and at Connecticut College. As a dancer in NYC



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and beyond, she has performed at BAM, DTW, the Whitney Museum, Walker Arts Center, and many other sites. (BA Swarthmore College, MA in process, in Integrative Health and Healing, 500 RYT yoga teacher, massage therapist)

The Mystic Paper Beasts, in addition to performing shows in museums, libraries, schools, festivals, events etc., also teach workshops in mask building, and/or in myth making in mask. These latter workshops have been adapted for different age groups. Student ages for both performance and workshop have ranged from 4 to 78, though we find we mostly work with elementary school aged children, college aged actors (at the National Theatre Institute, also at Conn. College), or special groups (e.g. a dance club of teenagers, a high school for deaf individuals, a parent-child library sponsored group etc.).

www.dragonseggstudio.org

ABOUT YOUNG AUDIENCES:

Young Audiences of Massachusetts (YAMA) is the oldest, largest and most utilized arts-in- education organization in the state and one of the largest in a national network of 33 chapters. For over 45 years, YA has been serving as a link between teaching artists and the region's school children, providing dance, storytelling, music and theater programs to children in schools, libraries and hospitals in the form of assembly performances, workshops and residencies. The organization's mission is to encourage lifelong engagement with the arts by making them an integral part of every child's education.