

State TheatreNJ.org
Keynotes

LE GRAND CIRQUE

The State Theatre, in New Brunswick, NJ welcomes you to the school-day performance of *Le Grand Cirque*, a show that has been seen by millions of people all over the world. The company is rooted in the circus traditions of Russia, China, and Eastern Europe. Their astonishing, entertaining spectacle features an international cast of some of the world's finest acrobats, jugglers, and gymnasts, along with dazzling costumes, lighting, and music.

We encourage you to use these *Keynotes* with your students to enhance their understanding and appreciation of the performance. Enjoy the show!

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The State Theatre, a premier nonprofit venue for the performing arts and entertainment.

Seen by millions of people around the world, Le Grand Cirque is a jaw-dropping spectacle of acrobatics and white-knuckle stunts. The company features an international cast of over 35 champion acrobats, jugglers, and gymnasts, chosen for their precision and skill. The performers come from Europe, Russia, China, Brazil, Canada, and the U.S.

Program

- Opening
- Tribal Rhythms
- Pole Climbing
- Candle Contortion
- Ascension
- Aerial Dreams
- Velocity
- Night on Bare Mountain
- Bikes
- Adrenaline
- Voices in the Wind
- Swan Lake
- Hand to Hand
- Grand Finale

Based on their titles, what do you think each of the acts will look like?

What images, smells, and sounds do you think of when you hear the word "circus"?



Meet the Host!

There is one character in Le Grand Cirque whom you'll see throughout the show. He plays with the audience, gets into trouble, and shows off some impressive circus skills of his own. He's Salvador Salangsang, and he's definitely NOT your average circus clown! As the emcee of Le Grand Cirque, Sal provides the comical transitions between the different acts. He keeps the audience smiling and laughing without speaking a single word. Originally from Hawaii, Sal planned to become an architect, but decided instead to go into show business. His first job as an entertainer was playing Shamu the Whale at Sea World in Texas. "I learned every part in the park so I could do five different shows," he says. This training came in handy when he went on to perform in Las Vegas and then with Le Grand Cirque.



Gymnastics

Many stunts in Le Grand Cirque are based on gymnastics, a sport that demands strength, flexibility, balance, grace, and precision. The origins of gymnastics are in ancient Greece, where jumping, running, and wrestling kept men physically fit and helped prepare them for war. Today, men and women participate in gymnastics as a competitive sport.



Contortion

Contortionists have the ability to bend and flex their bodies into impossible shapes and positions. Their flexibility is developed through intense gymnastic training. Most contortionists have spines that are more flexible bending in one particular direction; they are either "frontbenders" or "backbenders."

Cycling Feats

In parts of China, the peacock is a traditional symbol of good luck, happiness, beauty, and honesty. China's famous bicycle act features a large group of acrobats on one bicycle creating a moving tableau of a peacock spreading its feathers.



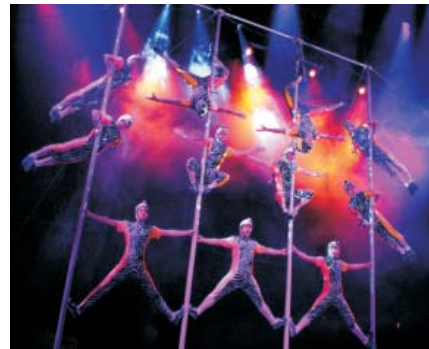
Aerial Silk

Aerial silk—also called tissu, ribbon, or fabric—is a circus art where performers execute acrobatic moves while hanging from long pieces of fabric. They use the fabric to pose, hang, fall, swing, and spiral their bodies into and out of various positions.



Hoop Diving

One of the oldest of the Chinese acrobatic arts, hoop diving had its origins in farming. During harvest time, field workers used large hoops with a mesh bottom to shake and divide the grain from the leaves and stems. It became a competition to see who could dive through the tallest stack of hoops.



Pole Climbing

The art of pole climbing was first developed by sailors as a test of endurance and fitness—climbing and jumping from mast to mast. Over the past 300 years, it

has evolved into one of the most complex and dangerous acts to be seen on stage.

Plate Spinning

Like juggling, plate spinning is a manipulation art. The performer balances plates, bowls, and other objects on top of thin poles, then sets the objects spinning without letting them fall. Plate spinning relies on the gyroscopic effect, in the same way a top stays upright while spinning.

Special Apparatus

As cirque shows become ever more popular, companies keep looking for new ways to thrill the audience and to set themselves apart from other cirque troupes. One solution is to invent new equipment that allows the performers to execute ever more dazzling and difficult stunts and to create exciting visual effects. Companies use the latest in design technology to create unique variations on wheels, swings, towers, seesaws, and other apparatus.



A History of Circus

The word "circus" comes from the Latin word for circle. In ancient Rome, the first and biggest circus was the Circus Maximus (great circus), a huge outdoor stadium used for chariot races, gladiator battles, and other spectacles. Its capacity was around 250,000—enough to hold more than one-fourth the population of Rome!

In the 1870s, American P.T. Barnum established his traveling circus, which featured exotic animals and a "freak show" (an exhibition of people with odd physical features or unusual talents). Barnum's show evolved into the circus most of us know today. Picture a huge tent with performances going on simultaneously in three different rings. There are elephants, lion tamers, bareback riders, trapeze artists, clowns, and more—all introduced by the ringmaster.

In the 1970s, performers from France, Australia, the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain created *nouveau cirque*, a hybrid of circus and theater. This movement spawned companies such as Cirque du Soleil and Le Grand Cirque.



Le Grand Cirque is part of a movement known as *cirque nouveau* (SIRK noo-VOH)—French for “new circus.” Originating in France in the 1970s, *cirque nouveau* combines elements of theater and circus. It tells a story or explores a theme using traditional circus skills such as juggling, acrobatics, trapeze, feats of strength, and clowning. Costumes, music, sets, and lighting are especially important in helping to create the magical world of a *cirque* show. Unlike traditional circuses, *cirque nouveau* typically does not use animals. The most widely known *cirque nouveau* troupe is Cirque du Soleil; there are a number of other popular companies from Canada, China, West Africa, the U.S., and other countries.



Cirque Nouveau



Traditional Circus

Presents an entertaining story or idea using a series of interrelated circus acts.

Individual acts are linked together by a theme and by a unified design concept.

Performers may include acrobats, jugglers, aerialists, trapeze artists, contortionists, gymnasts, and clowns.

Is usually performed indoors in a large theater or arena.

Usually does not include animals.

Clowns are often recurring characters who help tell the story. They can be dressed in traditional clown costumes or in ordinary clothes.

Performers are often trained in both circus skills and drama techniques.

Performers usually learn their skills at specialized circus or theater schools.

The best-known company is Cirque du Soleil.

Presents an entertaining spectacle using a series of unrelated circus acts.

Individual acts are unconnected to one another, each with its own look, sound, and mood.

Performers may include acrobats, jugglers, aerialists, trapeze artists, clowns, trained animals, and novelty acts.

Is usually performed outdoors in large tents.

Animals are a central part of the show.

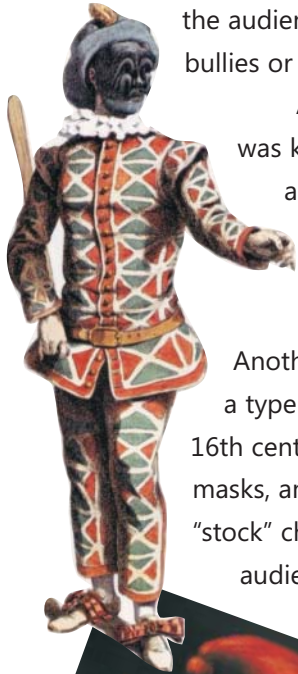
Clowns provide entertainment throughout the circus performance. They dress in elaborate costumes and usually wear heavy makeup, wigs, etc.

Performers usually learn one particular skill or act.

Performers are often part of a family tradition handed down generation by generation.

The best-known company is Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

If you look up “clown” in the dictionary, you’re likely to see a picture of a man wearing exaggerated makeup, a big fuzzy wig, and giant shoes. The art of clowning is much more diverse than this popular image. Clowns have been around for thousands of years and in every culture. Some use words; others are silent. They can wear outlandish makeup and costumes, or look completely ordinary. Some clowns are skillful acrobats and jugglers, while others touch the audience with their acting ability. What all clowns have in common is that they create characters that communicate with the audience through humor. The characters they portray can be bullies or victims, wise or foolish, graceful or clumsy.



An early type of clown was the fool or jester who was kept at court by the powerful nobility. Fools were allowed to make jokes about any subject—even about their masters—without fear of being punished. They served an important role as social and political critics of their time.

Another clowning tradition was the *commedia dell’arte*, a type of traveling comedy show that began in Italy in the 16th century. *Commedia dell’arte* combined improvisation, pantomime, masks, and physical comedy to act out simple stories. It used a cast of “stock” characters, each with specific traits and personalities that the audience could easily recognize (the master, the servant, the lover, the captain, the doctor, etc.). Many of the clown characters you see today have roots in *commedia dell’arte*.



During the show, pay special attention to the clowns. What role do they play in *Le Grande Cirque*?



There are clowns in many of Shakespeare’s plays. Can you name any?

Getting into Character

Most clowns base their characters on the way people behave in real life. Use your powers of observation to create an original clown character and bring it to life.

1. Study someone you don’t know—in the street, at a restaurant or other public place. Observe their posture, facial expressions, the way they walk, etc. You will use these traits to create your clown character.
2. Give your character a name, an occupation, and a particular problem that he or she is thinking about.
3. Design a “look” for your clown character: body language, walk, costume, makeup, and props.
4. Pretend that your character is a passenger on a bus, along with three or four of your classmates playing their own clown characters. The bus breaks down. What happens?
5. Act out the scene for your class.

“Makeup is a reflection of the character’s soul. It’s also a magic wand that sweeps away inhibitions.”

—*Nathalie Gagné,
Cirque du Soleil makeup designer*

Costumes, makeup, props, lighting, and sound create the overall atmosphere of both the traditional circus and a nouveau cirque show. The two styles of circus have a different approach to design. The clowns, lion-tamers, acrobats, ringmaster, and other traditional circus performers each have their own individual look and sound. In a cirque performance, however, there is usually an overall visual and sound design that connects each act to the central theme of the show. The costumes and music don’t have to be identical, but the style, color, shape, and feel are immediately identifiable as belonging to the same show.

The incredible costumes of Le Grand Cirque were made by hand by a team of designers and craftspeople. The costume construction alone kept 19 seamstresses busy with their sewing machines. The lighting design features a spectacular light show for each of the acts. The music for Le Grand Cirque takes familiar classics from the 19th and 20th centuries and sets them to a driving contemporary beat.



Questions for After the Show

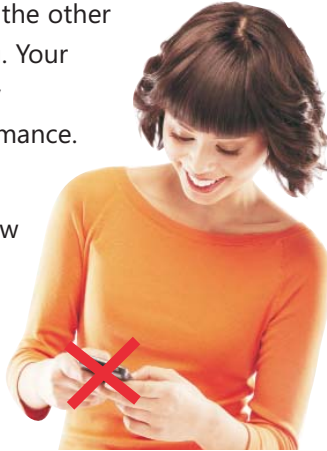
What did you notice about the overall sound and visual design that tied together the different acts? Was it effective?

If you could change one element of the design, what would it be? Why?

Did you recognize any of the classical music used in the performance? How well did it fit the overall design of the show?

Know Your Part!

One essential collaborator needed to create a live performance is the audience. The weeks and months of thought and preparation that go into a show are directed toward creating a performance that will inspire and entertain you and the other people who are watching and listening. Your role in this artistic collaboration is very important to the success of the performance. Make sure you know your part:



No texting.

- When you arrive at the theater, follow an usher to your seat.
- Before the show begins, make sure to turn off and put away all electronic devices, including cell phones, portable games and music, cameras, and recording equipment. Keep them off for the entire performance.

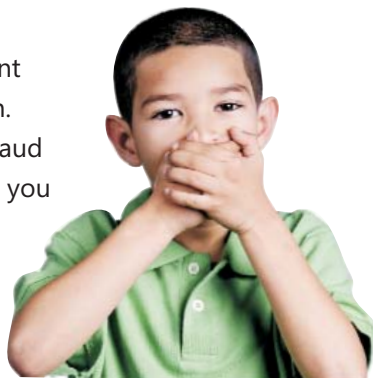
- Once the house lights (the lights in the part of the theater where the audience is sitting) go down, focus all your attention on the stage. Watch and listen carefully to the performance.



No photos.

- Attending a play in the theater is not the same as watching television at home. At the theater, talking, eating, and moving around disturbs the performers and other members of the audience. And please—**no texting or checking messages during the show!**

- If something in the show is meant to be funny, go ahead and laugh. And of course—feel free to applaud at the end of the performance if you liked what you saw.



No talking, please!

- After the performers are finished taking their bows, stay in your seat until your group gets the signal to leave the theater.

Resources

BOOKS

Aerial Dance, by Jayne Bernasconi and Nancy Smith. Human Kinetics, 2008. The history of aerial dance, teaching, and safety issues. High school and above.

The Circus: 1870-1950, by Noel Daniel. Taschen, 2008.

Clown Child, by Amy Littlesugar. Philomel, 2006. A little girl is a clown in a traveling circus and dreams of settling down. Grades K-3.

The Contemporary Circus: Art of the Spectacular, by Ernest Albrecht. Scarecrow Press, 2006. Grade 6 and above.

Dreams of the Solo Trapeze: Offstage with the Cirque du Soleil, by Mark Schreiber. Canal House, 2004. High school and above.

Strutter's Complete Guide to Clown Makeup, by Jim Roberts. Piccadilly Books, 1991.

WEBSITES

Le Grand Cirque homepage
www.legrandcirqueshow.com/

Le Grand Cirque videos
www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGzQMqgWiuk
www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLWz8Dvtb7o&feature=related

The Circus in America, a guide to the people, places, acts, and promotion of American circus from 1793-1940
www.circusinamerica.org/public/

Video lesson on how to spin a plate
www.youtube.com/watch?v=XS77k9Udu7o

