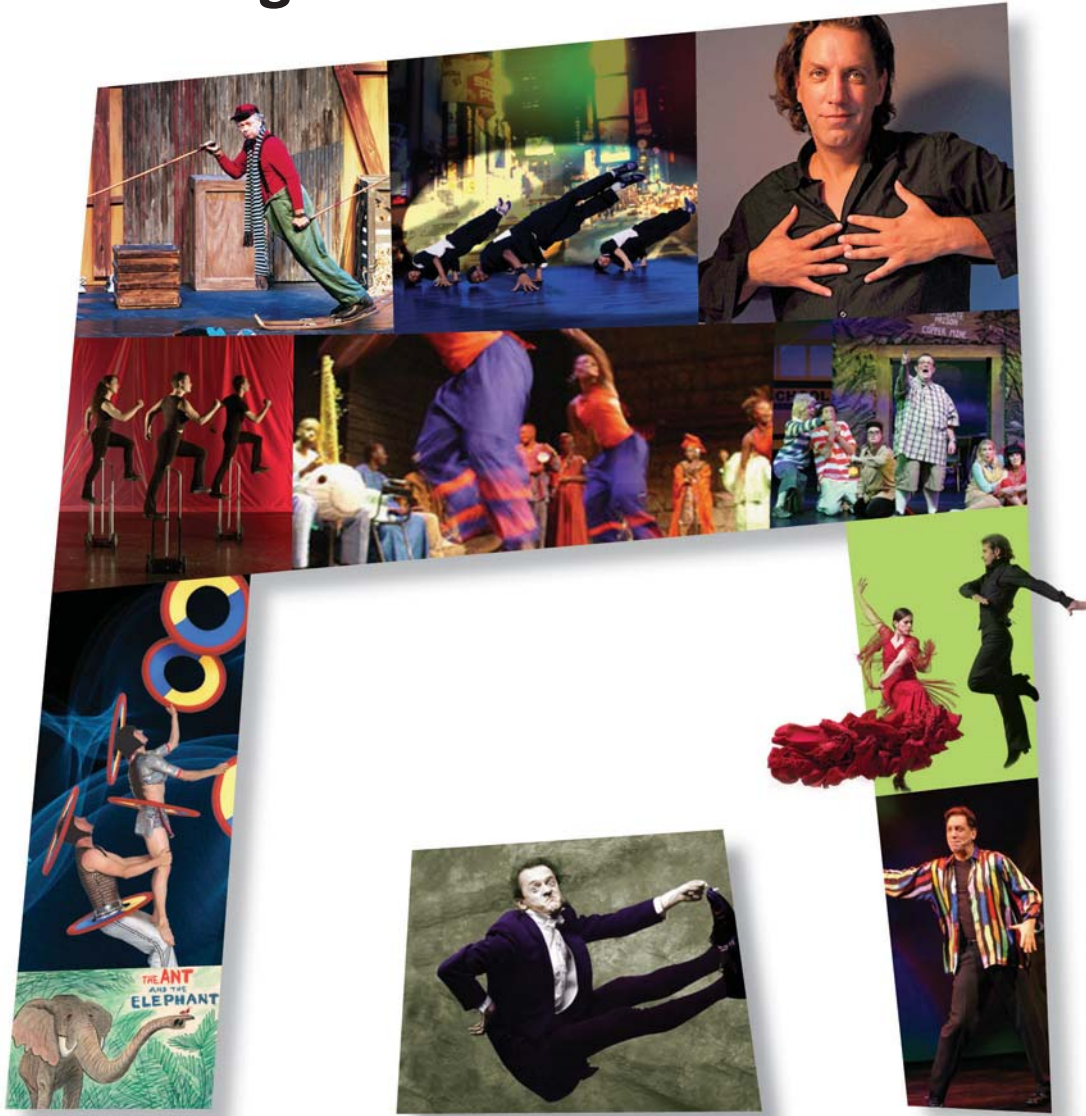




2008 > 09 A WORLD OF MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE & PERFORMANCE

2008 > 09 Learning Link



Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: Dallas Children's Theater

Monday, March 2, 2009, 9:30am & 11:00am

Recommended Grades: 1-7



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***“This wonderful folktale celebrates
virtue and kindness of the heart.”***

***--- Robyn Flatt,
director, Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter***

Connecting to Curriculum and Students' Lives!

History & Geography: Africa

Arts: Storytelling, folktales, children's theater

Science & Nature: Animal habitat; the jungle; the forest

Social Studies: Cultures; indigenous people; village life

Students' Lives: Making good choices

What is it?

Mufaro (moo-FAR-oh) means happy man. Nyasha (nee-AH-sha) means mercy. Manyara (mahn-YAR-ah) means ashamed. The language is Shona --- it's spoken in Zimbabwe --- and these names are central to the Caldecott Award-winning story “Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter” by John Steptoe. More than that, they really clue us in to the lesson underlying the tale, a lesson which is very much the point of Mr. Steptoe's reworking of an old folktale --- and of its theatrical embodiment, courtesy of Dallas Children's Theater.

And what a creative embodiment it is! Set pieces --- which never actually leave the stage, by the way --- transport us magically to village, jungle, and city. Could it be the evocative shifts in lighting which accomplish this sleight-of-hand? And how about those brilliantly colored costumes? And the sound, now soothing, now heart-stopping?

If you think “Mufaro’s Beautiful Daughter” is an African version of Cinderella, you may be right. The King wants a bride --- and in short order all the available young women put their best foot forward. Mufaro, a villager with two unmarried daughters --- Nyasha and Manyara --- entertains hopes that one of his lovelies will please the King. His daughters rather like that idea, too. However, the King seeks only *one* wife --- and these two daughters are not exactly alike with regard to temperament and disposition. Refer to the meaning of their names, above, for further clues as to how the story proceeds. Rather than spoil the plot here, we prefer to call attention to the animals, spirits, shadows, drumming, songs, and chanting which provide color and variety to this production. Too, we recommend for your consideration the actors who endow their characterizations with grace, humor, and energy --- and the storyteller who not only knows how to relish the telling of a good tale, but who takes on an acting assignment or two, as well.



Who Is It?

First, there is author John Steptoe. Both writer and illustrator, he has devoted his career to crafting books with African American themes. It wasn't until 1987 with the production of this particular story that he set aside the time to research Africa, its history, and its cultures. The result was an important document we might call it, which has inspired African American children to reflect on their heritage with pride.

Next, there's Karen Abbot, who adapted the work for the stage, and Robyn Flatt, Executive Artistic Director with Dallas Children's Theater as well as the director of this production. Costumes have been designed by Barbara Cox with an eye toward color and authenticity. The powerful scenic designs are the issue of Randel Wright. And Jennifer Hobson-Benton, a choreographer with loads of experience as a dancer and teacher, and making her debut with Dallas Children's Theater in this production, brings a nice depth of knowledge in things African to the show. Also there's the designer of that lighting we referred to just a bit ago --- Linda Blase --- whose plan helps bring each of the three locales to vibrant life.

Now, we would be remiss if we failed to mention G. M. Theale. It was he who, in 1895's publication of "Kaffir Folktales," first put into print the original African folktale on which "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter" is based.

Finally, there is Dallas Children's Theater, several of whose main cogs we've already introduced in this Learning Link. No less august a publication than Time Magazine has singled out Dallas Children's Theater as one of the five foremost companies currently focussed on a youth constituency. A professional enterprise, it serves 250,000 young people and their families over the course of a year. Principally, this is accomplished through the mounting of eleven main stage productions, a touring company, and an education and outreach program. "Dallas Children's Theater builds bridges of understanding between generations and cultures," declares its web site with a hint of justifiable pride.

"Our productions promote social values, moral integrity, and reflect the cultural diversity of our community through casting and themes."

--- DCT web site

Roots

After investigating the African nation of Mali for an earlier event in our Field Trip Series, here we are looking at another landlocked African locale. To wit, Zimbabwe. Once known as Southern Rhodesia, it has been much in the news in recent years thanks to the controversial regime of President Mugabe --- and thanks to a devastating drought and its aftermath. Hemmed in by South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, and Mozambique, Zimbabwe recognizes English as its official language. This, of course, is a holdover from many years as part of the British Empire, and its history-altering encounter with Cecil Rhodes. Shona, however, is the language that most of Zimbabwe's inhabitants speak --- and those who don't, speak Sindebele. If you speak the former, chances are you're part of the Shona people --- and yours is a Bantu language.

The area was lively with Stone Age hunters a mere 5,000 years ago. Bantu folks only started arriving around 300 B.C. Their numbers included Shona ancestors. It was in the 10th and 11th Centuries that the civilization reached its apogee, trading with Phoenicians and Arabs --- gold, ivory, and copper in exchange for glass and cloth. At this stage, the area was known as the Empire of Great Zimbabwe. By the 17th Century, however, Portuguese settlers had largely destroyed that civilization. In short order then (well, *relatively* short) came the Ndebele people, and then Cecil Rhodes.

To get ready for the performance, students might investigate ...

- Zimbabwe
- Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter
- African folktales
- Shona people and language
- The original folktale
- Africa

In activities prior to the performance, could students...

- Create drawings on paper of traditional Zimbabwe dress, paying close attention to geometric patterns and shapes, as well as vivid colors carefully separated? Could they be encouraged to consider some meanings which lie behind color choices in the culture? For example: red = life; blue = innocence; green = Mother Africa; black = unity; gold = strength.
- Read John Steptoe's story and focus on examples of the Shona language and its meanings? For example: nyoha = snake; chuma = wealth; rudo = love.
- Research their own names to discover the origin and meaning? Could they also enquire of parents the circumstances of the name choice? Could these names and their meanings become part of a class story or mural?

- Act out another African folktale, focussing on language and expressiveness of movement?
- Create a diorama of a typical Shona village?

After coming to the performance, students could research these:

- Cecil Rhodes and British imperialism
- The Zimbabwe trade routes
- Bantu
- African villages
- Jungle
- Children's Theater

In activities after the performance, could students...

- Learn to pronounce and use a small vocabulary of Shona words?
- Examine "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter" in light of other "Cinderella stories" --- in order to discover which elements are constants in these --- and how the story adapts itself to different cultures?
- Create brief skits which involve drumming, spirits, and animals --- and which explore some of the themes from "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter?"
- Write a dialogue which takes place between Cecil Rhodes and a member of the Shona people?
- Write a poem about the jungle or the forest and try turning it into a song by adding melodic and rhythmic components?

"The forest acts as a spiritual place, mirroring what the girls are on the inside. Each daughter's inner spirit is revealed in her reactions to those she encounters."

--- Robyn Flatt

What do YOU think?

TRY ANSWERING THESE YOURSELF --- AND ADAPT THEM FOR STUDENT USE.

- What were some surprising twists in the plot?
- How do the actors embody their characters? What skills do they call upon?
- How is music used in this work --- and what are the different kinds of music used?
- Which elements seem specifically African in origin? What gives the clue to this?
- How would you describe the ways in which the bodies move?
- What role does lighting play? What are the different effects it creates, and how does it do so?
- What are some good adjectives for the costumes?
- How are the set pieces an integral part of this performance --- and how exactly do they function?
- If you've read the story, how does this incarnation differ?
- In your opinion, does the work at hand promote reflection on the issue of race? If so, how?
- What are your observations on the use of sound, with regard to music, the human voice, sound effects?
- What are the themes of this work?
- How is a sense of location achieved in this production?
- This work is classified as Children's Theater. Does that make it seem as if it is in some ways different from other kinds of theater? How so?
- Would you characterize the use of language as, say, conversational, or ceremonial, or ...?
- How is contrast of significance in "Mufaro's Beautiful Daughter"?
- What do you think is being told us by the specific wording of the title?
- In your opinion, is setting a crucial component to the effectiveness of this story? Ask yourself why/why not.
- If the dance in this show is African, which moves seem to make it so?
- In what ways could this work --- and others like it --- be a catalyst for honoring tradition and building bridges between cultures?
- Which other works does this one put you in mind of?

Internet

DALLAS CHILDREN'S THEATER

www.dct.org

CHILDREN'S THEATER

childrenstheatre.easystorecreator.com

faculty-web.at.northwestern.edu/theater/tya

AUTHOR JOHN STEPTOE

the Internet School Library Media Center *John Steptoe* page:

falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/steptoe.htm

The John Steptoe Papers:

avatar.lib.usm.edu/~degrum/html/research/findaids/DG1168f.html?DG1168b/html~mainFrame

ZIMBABWE

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zimbabwe

www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5479.htm

www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0108169.html

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Zimbabwe

www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=ad28

SHONA

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shona_people

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shona_language

www.bulawayo1872.com/history/shona.htm

BANTU

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bantu_languages

www.sil.org/silesr/2002/016/silesr2002-016.htm

AFRICAN FOLKTALES

ccs.clarityconnect.com/NRiggs/AfricanFolktales.html

www.canteach.ca/elementary/africa.html

www.phillipmartin.info/liberia/text_folktales_intro.htm

TEACHER'S GUIDE TO AFRICAN FOLKTALES

www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/afolk/afolktg.html

Books

Count Your Way Through Zimbabwe

Author: James Haskins, Kathleen Benson

Reading level: Ages 4-8

Publisher: Millbrook Press (August 15, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1575058855

Zimbabwe In Pictures

Author: Francesca Di Piazza
Reading level: Ages 9-12
Publisher: Lerner Publications (April 30, 2005)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 082252399X

Great Zimbabwe

Author: Mark Bessire
Reading level: Ages 9-12
Publisher: Franklin Watts (March 1999)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 0531202852

Letters Home From - Zimbabwe

Author: Lisa Halvorsen
Publisher: Blackbirch Press; 1st edition (September 12, 2000)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 1567114121

African Folktales

Author: Roger Abrahams
Publisher: Pantheon (August 12, 1983)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 0394721179

The Cow-Tail Switch: And Other West African Stories

Author: Harold Courlander, George Herzog
Reading level: Ages 9-12
Publisher: Owllet Paperbacks; 1st edition (March 15, 1987)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 0805002987

The Lion and the Hare: An East African Folktale

Author: Stephen Krensky
Reading level: Ages 4-8
Publisher: Millbrook Pr (September 2008)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 0822575469

Too Much Talk: A West African Folktale

Author: Angela Shelf Medearis
Reading Level: Preschool to Grade 3
Publisher: Candlewick; 1st edition (October 2, 1995)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 1564023230

Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters Big Book

Author: John Steptoe
Reading level: Ages 4-8
Publisher: HarperTrophy (October 22, 1993)
Language: English
ISBN-10: 0688129358

The true story of Cecil Rhodes in Africa

Author: Peter Gibbs
Publisher: Children's Press (1964)
Language: English
ASIN: B0006BLWUFU

“DCT believes that theater provides a unique learning opportunity, which allows children exposure to ideas and imagery that reflect their own experiences and challenge their own understanding of the world in which they live.”

--- DCT web site