



Mondavi Center ArtSmarts
2002-2003 Wells Fargo School Matinee Series

The Red Balloon

November 4, 2002
Mondavi Center, UC Davis, 11:00am

Dear Teachers:

We hope you will find this teacher's guide helpful in preparing your students for what they will experience at *The Red Balloon* matinee. The guide provides background information on the play and Visible Fictions Theatre, the company that produced it. Information is also provided on mime and puppetry, which are used creatively in the performance. Also included in the guide is a review of theater conventions and audience protocol.

Mondavi Center gratefully acknowledges the institutional donors supporting the Arts Education Program during the 2002-2003 Season of Performing Arts:



With additional support provided by UC Davis School/University Partnerships, WESTAF, and the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation.

THE RED BALLOON



Adapted from Albert Lamorisse's beloved children's book and the 1956 movie of the same title, *The Red Balloon* is an enchanting story of Pascal, a small boy who feels misunderstood and ignored. At home his parents don't seem to notice him, and in the playground his school friends seem unkind.

One day he spies a magical red balloon. Pursuing the floating orb across Paris, Pascal encounters a variety of characters, learning some important lessons about the joys and frustrations of friendship. With inventive dialogue, mime, dance, puppetry, and music from pop to classical, Visible Fictions Theatre Company – the first Scottish company ever to perform on Broadway – gives *The Red Balloon* a bouncy twist.

VISIBLE FICTIONS THEATRE COMPANY

Visible Fictions Theatre Company is a professional children's theatre company which is committed to producing dynamic, imaginative and captivating productions for young audiences. Among its eight productions were *Bill's New Frock*, *Peacemaker*, *Giant Steps*, and *Pinocchio*.

With *The Red Balloon*, "We wanted to come back to the importance of storytelling," Douglas Irvine, one of the founding members and the actor who plays the red balloon in the play, told the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*.

The storytelling process is inventive. For example, by animating the red balloon, it becomes the main character. By attaching a stick to the balloon with the actor controlling it from afar, the balloon takes on human traits.

"The technical term is object theatre," Irvine said. "The point of object theatre is for the actor to invest his energy into the object. Acting can be very ego-driven. In a strange way, I'm finding myself subservient to this bit of rubber."

Visible Fictions is also inventive in character portrayals. For example, Pascal, the boy, is portrayed by an adult female and two of the actors play many characters. As the narrative requires, the two slide from one identity to another.

MIME AND PUPPETRY

In addition to dialogue, dance, and music, Visible Fictions Theatre employs mime and puppetry to imbue *The Red Balloon* with magic, fantasy, and fun.

The Origins and Development of the Art of Mime

Before the human voice developed, gestures served not only to communicate but also to aid in the development of vocal sounds. Later they were incorporated in the first forms of written language of, for example, the Egyptians, the Aztecs, and in the pictographic writings of the Hebrews. Gestures and expressive movement were also utilized in ancient religious dances and ceremonies. And from the ancient ceremonies in China, Japan, India, and Egypt emerged the actor, who was at once a dancer, singer, and mime.

The art of mime developed into several distinct categories, but it was rarely separated from dance and speaking theatre. Only among the Romans did it disengage from dance and speech to give birth to pantomime. Roman pantomime consisted of short, improvised, burlesque scenes and depicted current events and themes of love, adultery, and mocking of the gods.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, entertainers who inherited the Greco-Roman mime traditions sang, danced, imitated, and performed acrobatics at the courts and at private banquets throughout Europe. And despite the ups and downs of their fortune, strolling jongleurs and mimes never abandoned the ancient mime traditions.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, allegorical and mythological, pageant-type ballet-pantomimes were performed at the courts and in the theatres of Europe. The traditional dumb show in the 18th- and 19th-century French and English melodramas, as well as the Elizabethan dumb shows, were also called pantomimes. When staged in the English music halls at Christmas, they were called harlequinades. By the end of the 19th century, English Christmas pantomimes such as *Cinderella* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* contained spectacular scenic effects and popular music hall interludes with dialogue, acrobatics, singing, and dancing. And even though these Christmas pantomimes had almost no mime or dumb show and contained mostly dialogue, singing, and dancing, they were still called pantomimes or dumb shows because they included

some element, however remote, of miming's technique and art. In 19th-century England and America, pantomime was incorporated into circus acts.

Meanwhile, in France, Gaspard Debureau had immortalized the silent Pierrot pantomimes, which we today call pantomime blanche because of the white face the artist wears. His Pierrot, though inspired by the lazy, mischievous valet Pedrolino of the *commedia dell'arte*, soon became an essentially French character. He changed Pierrot from a cynical, grotesque rogue into a poetic fellow and brought a personal expression to the fantasy, acrobatics, melodrama, and spectacular staging that characterized 19th-century pantomimes.

Mime, also returned to the forefront in 1923, when Jacques Copeau founded his acting school, where miming with a mask and doing exercises helped the actor find greater corporeal expressivity. Convinced that the human body alone suffices to dress a bare stage the exercises were developed into a code of corporeal mime.

By the mid-20th century, Paris was the place for mimes to be. It was here that several great masters gave new life to the mime art, as well as merged it with other forms. Through style pantomimes, this art became known to the world. The global training method fused the art of the clown and the buffoon, juggling, acrobatics, spoken text, dance, plastic arts, and all of life with body movement. Movement expression, based on the observation of natural movement, opened up new directions for physical theatre.

Three main schools of mime developed in Europe that had worldwide repercussions. The more commonly white-faced, illusioned pantomime portrayed concrete emotions and situations by means of conventional gestures, creating the illusion of something there which in reality is not. Corporeal mimes rejected this form to express abstract and universal ideas and emotions through codified movements of the entire body. Those in movement theatre combined acting, dance, and clowning with movement. However, in the 1980s, even the white-face, illusion pantomimists and corporeal mimes began expanding in many new directions. Instead of limiting themselves to silent expression and classical pantomime or codified mime technique, they experimented freely with texts and the use of voice. Some mimes wrote their own texts, as did the Greek mime-authors, integrating the mime-actor's art with the author's. They also included props, costumes, masks,

lighting effects, and music. Mime in the postmodern era thus incorporated so many new elements that it was no longer referred to exclusively as mime. It was called mime-dance, mime-clowning, mime-puppetry, new vaudeville, etc. And if it contained movement expression along with other elements, it was loosely alluded to as physical or movement theatre.

Twentieth century verbal theatre also explored the use of physical expression (mime in a broader sense) to create a more complete or total form of theatre. This not only allowed the actor to challenge his/her own creative resources but drew the spectator into a fuller sensory experience, reestablishing the theatre as spectacle and giving free vent to the development of a fertile, richer, and more visual theatre.

Excerpted from the book, *From the Greek Mimes to Marcel Marceau and Beyond: Mimes, Actors, Pierrots and Clowns: A Chronicle of many Visages of Mime in the Theatre*, by Annette Lust/

The Historical Development of Puppetry

A puppet is a figure – human, animal, or abstract in form – that is moved by human, and not mechanical, aid. (Encyclopædia Britannica)

Puppetry is closely related to feats of magic and conjuring. All through history, magicians entertained in the public streets, and later, on the stage. The first magician recorded in history was named Dedi in ancient Egypt and is mentioned on the *Westcar Papyrus* of 1700 B.C. located at the East Berlin State Museum. There also exists a wall painting in Beni Hasan, Egypt (unfortunately now submerged underwater during excavations in 1966), showing a conjurer performing the famous cups and balls trick for another person. This is dated 2500 B.C. Milbourne Christopher, author of *The Illustrated History of Magic*, mentioned, “While Dedi’s name is the only one that has survived from this period, it is probable that contemporary conjurers were performing in Babylonia, India, and China.”

These tricks possibly first originated in prehistoric times when tribal shamans (witch doctors) performed them in order to display their prowess and to retain their position of power

against all those desirous of replacing them as their respective tribe's spiritual leader. In Indonesia today, the dalang (shadow player) functions as a kind of shaman performing magic (wayang kulit, or shadow play) for healing and exorcism of evil influences. Puppets, then, can be seen as a magician's trick, where the mode of the movement of the figures is hidden from the audience.

It may be that puppets were derived from folk artists watching the spectacular public presentations of automata – presented sometimes by official players – where all techniques used to impart motion to the figures were concealed or secret. In their attempts to imitate the automata, these folk artists may have hit upon the means whereby puppets are manipulated.

Article by Keith Rawlings

<http://sagecraft.com/puppetry>

THINK ABOUT IT!

Dear Students:

Talking with your teacher, friends, and family about a performance after attending is part of the experience. You can now compare ideas, ask questions and find out how to learn even more. Here are some questions to think about:

1. How would you describe *The Red Balloon* to a friend?
2. What did you like best about *The Red Balloon* and why? Was it what you had expected?
3. Who were your favorite characters and why? Would you consider the red balloon a character?
4. Have you ever found friendship or affection in a “thing”?
5. Describe what happens at the end of *The Red Balloon*.
6. What were some of the ways you used your own imagination in understanding the story?
7. Do you think *The Red Balloon* would appeal to an adult member of your family? Why or why not?

ATTENDING THE THEATER

What is expected of student audiences at the matinee:

- Enter the auditorium quietly and take seats immediately (*note that all matinees now have reserved seating*);
- Show courtesy to the artist and other guests at all times;
- Demonstrate appreciation for the artist's work by applauding at the appropriate times;
- Refrain from making unnecessary noise or movements;
- Please eat lunch before or after the performance to avoid disruption;
- Relate any information acquired from the pre-matinee discussion to the new information gained from the matinee;
- Please do not use flash photography.

What you can expect of your experience in a performing arts theater:

A theater is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights (the lights that illuminate the audience seating) go down, the excitement level goes up! Theaters are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience: whispering, rustling of papers, speaking and moving about, can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these upset everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance.

The performers on stage show respect for their art form and for the audience by doing their very best work. The audience shows respect for the performers by watching attentively. Applause is the best way for audience members to share their enthusiasm and to show their appreciation for the performers. Applaud at the end of a performance! Sometimes the audience will clap during a performance, as after a featured solo. Audience members may feel like laughing if the action on stage is funny, crying if the action is sad, or sighing if something is seen or heard that is beautiful. Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form and the culture(s) of the people in the audience. While the audience at a dance performance will sit quietly, other types of performance invite audience participation.

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