

# Crabgrass Puppet Theatre

## The Last Dragon on Earth

### Study Guide

**CRABGRASS PUPPET THEATRE'S** shows are aimed at educating as well as entertaining our audiences. School performances include a demonstration of the puppets and the techniques we use. This study guide provides background information about our show and suggestions for in-class activities.

#### **ABOUT EDITH NESBIT AND THE LAST OF THE DRAGONS**

Edith Nesbit, who wrote books as “E. Nesbit,” was born in England in 1858 and died in 1924. In addition to writing for children, she wrote poetry, plays, short stories and essays, and was a political activist. Though she lived at a time when women who could afford to were expected to stay home, raise children and take care of their husbands, and were certainly not expected to work, she ignored all of that and (like the Princess in her story) did what she wanted and what she was good at. This turned out to be writing and raising children. She and her husband had three children, and she also raised several children of friends. Her husband was not very good at making money, so she supported the whole family by writing. She published more than forty books for children, writing by herself, and another forty writing with other people. In addition to the modern fairy tales like ***The Last of the Dragons***, Nesbit wrote wonderful adventure stories for children, including ***The Railway Children***, ***The Story of the Treasure Seekers***, and ***The Wouldbegoods***.

***The Last of the Dragons*** was published in 1899. We decided to call our version ***The Last Dragon on Earth***, because we wanted to emphasize the theme of extinction.

#### **ABOUT CRABGRASS PUPPET THEATRE**

**CRABGRASS PUPPET THEATRE** was founded in 1982 by **Jamie Keithline** and **Bonny Hall**. Jamie and Bonny met in 1979, while performing in a puppet-and-actor production at the University of Connecticut in which Bonny played Jamie's father! They have been working together ever since.

Jamie and Bonny not only perform all of their shows, but they design and build the puppets and sets, write the scripts, and record the soundtracks.

**Crabgrass Puppet Theatre** has performed at the Smithsonian, the Detroit Institute of Art, the Ottawa Children's Museum, the California Academy of Sciences, the World Trade Center, and thousands of schools, museums, and theaters across the country. They have been selected to perform at numerous puppetry festivals, and have won two Citations of Excellence from UNIMA-USA, the highest honor in American puppetry.

## TYPES OF PUPPETS

**ROD PUPPETS** are moved from below or behind with rods (sticks). The dragon is a rod puppet, with one main rod attached to the head, and a strap attached to the underside of the dragon's belly which the puppeteer grasps to control the body and tail.

**SHADOW PUPPETS** are two-dimensional (flat) figures that are placed against a screen that has a light behind it, so that the audience sees the shadow of the puppet. The puppets have rods that allow the puppeteers to hold them against the screen and move different parts. Shadow puppets can also be played on an overhead projector.

**HAND PUPPETS** are one of the earliest forms of puppet theater. Many countries and cultures have hand puppet traditions, including China, Great Britain, and France. There are several different ways to manipulate hand puppets; with these puppets we put our index and middle fingers in the head, the thumb in one arm, and the fourth and fifth fingers in the other arm.

**How are the puppets made?** We make all of the puppets, as well as the scenery and stage. The puppets' heads are first sculpted in clay. We then make a plaster mold of the head, so that when the plaster has dried, it takes the shape of the head and features. We pour a liquid rubber, called neoprene, into the mold. When that cures (dries), it becomes hard, and we have a durable hollow puppet head. The bodies of the hand puppets are made of cloth, and the dragon's body is made of a dense, stiff foam rubber – the same stuff that pool noodles are made of. We carve it with an electric carving knife.

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & DISCUSSION

### Language skills:

Read the story, “The Last of the Dragons,” and compare it with our show. When we create a show based on a book or a story, we have to **adapt** the story so that it will work well as a puppet show. Sometimes we leave something or someone out to make the story work on stage. How is our show different from the story written by Edith Nesbit?

“The Last of the Dragons” is available in ***The Last of the Dragons and Some Others***, by E. Nesbit, published by Puffin Classics.

It is also available online, full text, at:  
[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Last\\_of\\_the\\_Dragons](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Last_of_the_Dragons)

Research other fantastic and imaginary creatures such as unicorns, griffins, the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, etc.

Write letters to the puppeteers about the show. What did you enjoy most? (Feedback from teachers is also welcome!) Send letters to:

Crabgrass Puppet Theatre  
c/o Encore Performing Arts  
P.O. Box 630  
Melville, NY 11747

### Modern Fairy Tales

“The Last of the Dragons,” the story we adapted into our show, ***The Last Dragon on Earth***, is one of the earliest examples of fairy tales that were meant to be different from the old-style European and English fairy tales. In older stories, some of which are hundreds of years old, the princess is usually sweet, beautiful, not very smart, frightened of many things, and, when she finds herself in trouble, waits to be rescued by a man (usually a prince). The prince is usually brave and strong and willing to put himself in danger to save the poor princess. But over the last hundred or so years, writers of fairy tales have noticed that women are often strong, smart and brave themselves, and don't always need to be

rescued by men, and that many men don't fit the traditional role of the prince, either. Edith Nesbit was one of the first writers to write stories with brave, smart women. Think about the old-style fairy tales you know, such as "Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," "The Princess on the Pea," and others. Do you think the women and girls are waiting around to be rescued? Do you think (girls and boys) that you would behave this way if you were in the same situation?

Other modern fairy tales with strong women and girls:

***The Practical Princess and Other Liberating Fairy Tales***, by Jay Williams  
***Petronella***, by Jay Williams  
***The Paper Bag Princess***, by R. Munsch  
***Tatterhood and Other Tales: Stories of Magic and Adventure***, by Ethel Johnston Phelps  
***Rumpelstiltskin's Daughter***, by Diane Stanley  
***Not One Damsel in Distress: World Folktales for Strong Girls***, by Jane Yolen

#### **Art skills:**

Using paper and crayons or paint, make a large dragon and put it up in the cafeteria or in your classroom. It's easier to make this in several small parts!

Find a book on shadow puppets and have the students construct and produce a shadow play.

Make a comic strip mural of the show, with each student drawing one thing that happened. Put them up on the wall in the order in which the events happened.

#### **Pop-Up Paper Engineering**

Much of the scenery and odd things that appear in our show are created using the technology of pop-up books and cards. When we started to design our show, we decided we wanted the scenery to fold flat so that it would be easy to carry and transport, but we also wanted the scenery to have dimension and depth. These needs led us to pop-up books and cards, and we spent a lot

of time studying them and learning how to make things pop up and out, using paper. It was a lot of fun!

#### **Activity for Older Elementary Students:**

Look at pop-up books and/or cards, and see if you can figure out how the paper engineer makes these things come out of a flat page.

Visit the website [www.popupbooks.com](http://www.popupbooks.com). There are wonderful projects you can do, with patterns you can download and print from your computer.

#### **Social Studies:**

We have set our story in the early years of the twentieth century, when automobiles were a brand new thing. Look in your library for other books about this era. What were some of the changes that came with the modern era? How was it different from today? How did people get around? Would you like to have lived then? Why or why not?

#### **Science:**

Some people believe dragons were real creatures like dinosaurs. Some think they were made up. Some people think they were exaggerated accounts of real animals. What do you think? What animals can you think of that might have looked like dragons?

What are some of the ways that dragons are like animals that are around today? What kind of skin did they have? Do you think they could really fly?

In the story, the dragon is the last of his kind. What are some other animals who are threatened with extinction? What are some animals that are extinct?

#### **Computer skills:**

Find **Crabgrass Puppet Theatre's** home page at: [www.crabgrasspuppets.com](http://www.crabgrasspuppets.com).

Search for other information about dragons, puppets and puppeteers on the web.

Send an e-mail to Crabgrass Puppet Theatre at [info@crabgrasspuppets.com](mailto:info@crabgrasspuppets.com)

## **Audience skills:**

How is live performance different from television or a movie? How is it different from a football or basketball game? How should you act in a performance? If you were giving a performance, how would you want your audience to act?

## **INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS ON AUDIENCE BEHAVIOR:**

Many children do not have much experience with live performance, and do not understand that live performance is different from a sports event, a movie, or television. It is helpful to discuss audience behavior with them prior to the performance. In addition to the basics (pay attention, don't talk, don't yell out), the following is important:

**Applauding:** this is the main way the audience shows its appreciation to the performers. Teachers can explain this prior to the performance, and can lead the way by applauding at the end of stories and at the end of the show.

**Laughing:** is another way of showing appreciation! We are *trying* to make the audience laugh, and sometimes we will visit a school where the teachers quiet the children when they laugh. We *want* them to laugh! Young children may need to be reminded that after they laugh, they need to quiet down again to listen.

**Is it okay for teachers to laugh?** YES! We are performing for teachers as well as students, and there is plenty of humor in our shows for adults. Many teachers seem uncomfortable laughing in a school performance, but teachers' laughter does several important things. Overall, it shows the children that the teachers are paying attention to and enjoying the performance, which elevates the children's interest. It also raises the children's understanding of more sophisticated humor: when teachers laugh at something the children didn't find funny, the children often realize quickly that it *was* funny, and we get a second wave of

laughter. The most enjoyable performances we do are the ones in which both teachers and students are engaged and responding.

**Teachers: please be courteous to the performers!** We're well aware of how overworked and short of time most teachers are these days. But if teachers are correcting papers or carrying on conversations during a performance, they are unable to become involved in the performance, discuss it with their students afterwards, or set an example for the children by responding and applauding at the correct times. We are visiting more and more schools in which the teachers talk to each other during our shows; this sets a terrible example for the students, and makes it very difficult for us as performers. Teachers would definitely not appreciate it if we came into their classrooms while they were teaching and talked throughout the lesson . . .

## **For More Information:**

To learn more about Crabgrass Puppet Theatre and our shows, please visit us on the web at [www.crabgrasspuppets.com](http://www.crabgrasspuppets.com).

To bring Crabgrass Puppet Theatre to your school, please contact:

Encore Performing Arts  
P.O. Box 630  
Melville, NY 11747  
800 669-9850  
email: [info@encoreperforming.com](mailto:info@encoreperforming.com)