

Crabgrass Puppet Theatre

Mr. Punch's Christmas Carol

Study Guide

CRABGRASS PUPPET THEATRE'S shows are designed to educate as well as entertain our audiences. School performances include a special demonstration of the puppets and techniques we use. This study guide is designed to give background information about the show, and suggestions for classroom activities.

ABOUT CHARLES DICKENS' A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Charles Dickens is the author of *A Christmas Carol*. He was born in 1812, and died in 1870. He wrote many other books and stories, including *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations*, and *David Copperfield*, and is one of the finest British writers of all time. Dickens was very concerned about poverty, child labor, charity, and education of the poor, and he wrote about these issues in his books. Being poor is never easy anywhere, but it was particularly hard in England during Dickens' time. In addition to writing books, he wrote pamphlets and made speeches to get other people to help the poor.

Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* in 1843. The idea for the book came from a story he had written in *The Pickwick Papers*, "The Goblin and the Sexton." He worked very hard, saw very few people while writing the book, and finished the book in only six weeks. The book came out at Christmastime and sold wildly. It was very popular. Dickens was happy with the book and very glad so many other people liked it, and he had a wonderful Christmas that year.

ABOUT MR. PUNCH

Punch and Judy have been on the puppet scene for over 400 years, and have been seen in this country for at least 250 years. Punch and Judy shows were performed by one person, who did all the voices, movement, sound effects, everything! Often, the puppeteer would perform outdoors, in parks and on the street. The puppeteer would have to gather the audience, and at the end of the show would ask for money – kind of like buying a ticket AFTER you've seen the show! The classic Punch and Judy show is a series of encounters between Mr. Punch and a string of other characters, which end very badly for the other characters. He does away with his child, his wife, his friends, the police, the hangman and the devil with quick dispatch. The original Punch and Judy shows were not designed as children's entertainment, and were full of political and social satire. In the 20th century, Punch and Judy shows began to be played exclusively for children, leading to Mr. Punch's bad reputation.

Our Mr. Punch is far less violent than his ancestor, but still possesses most of his bad habits and certainly retains the famous Bad Attitude. Because he's such a crabby character, we thought he would be perfect to play Scrooge, the biggest miser of all time.

ABOUT CRABGRASS PUPPET THEATRE

Jamie Keithline and Bonny Hall are the **Crabgrass Puppet Theatre**. They have been working together since 1982, creating puppet shows and performing them around the country. Jamie and Bonny lived in San Francisco and performed in California when they first started their company. In 1989, they moved to Connecticut, and in 2001, to Vermont.

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.

In 2001, Crabgrass Puppet Theatre was awarded a **Citation for Excellence in the Art of Puppetry** from the American Center of the Union Internationale de la Marionette, the highest honor in American puppetry, for their production of *Anansi, Spiderman of Africa*. In 2004 they were again honored, this time for *The Bremen Town Musicians*.

ABOUT THE PUPPETS

MR. PUNCH'S CHRISTMAS CAROL uses four different types of puppets:

Hand Puppets can be as simple as a ball on your index finger, or as complex as a fully-costumed figure with moving eyes, mouth, and hands. Hand puppets are the simplest kind of puppet because there is a direct control of the puppet by the puppeteer (no rods or strings in between).

Rod Puppets are moved from below or behind with sticks or rods. They can be operated with only one rod on the body, or with several rods attached to the heads, arms, and legs. Most rod puppets are operated by one person, but some are operated by two people.

Hand and Rod Puppets combine qualities of both rod puppets and hand puppets. Most hand & rod puppets have the hand inside the body, controlling the body and/or the head, and often making the mouth move. Rods are usually used to move the arms and legs.

Shadow Puppets are two-dimensional (flat) figures that are placed against a screen and lit from behind, 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 to move different parts of the puppet.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION & ACTIVITIES

Language skills:

- After the puppet show, discuss the different types of puppets used. How did the puppets move?
- Charles Dickens is the author of **A Christmas Carol**. What can you find out about his life? What was his childhood like? What other books did he write?

Writing:

- Write letters to the puppeteers, and tell them what you think about the show. (Feedback from teachers is also encouraged!) Send letters to:
Crabgrass Puppet Theatre
c/o Encore Performing Arts
P.O. Box 630,
Melville, NY 11747
- When we create a puppet show that is based on a book or story, we have to **adapt** the story so it works well as a puppet show. In this case we **adapted** our script from Charles Dickens' original story. We left out some parts of his story, and added others. Which parts of the story do you think we might have made up? What would you have added to the story?
- Try making an adaptation of your own. Start with a familiar story, like "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" or "Little Red Riding Hood." Think of ways to tell the story as a puppet show.

Computer skills:

- Find **Crabgrass Puppet Theatre's** home page at: www.crabgrasspuppets.com.
- Send an email to the puppeteers at info@crabgrasspuppets.com.

Library skills:

- Look in the library for puppet books, and try to find out more about Punch and Judy. Can you find pictures of Punch and Judy puppets?
- For upper elementary: look for a script of the original Punch and Judy show, and act out a scene with puppets.
- **A Christmas Carol** was written in England in 1843. What were people's lives like in 1843? What did kids do? What kind of clothes did they wear? Did they all go to school? How is your life different from theirs? Look in the library for books about England in the mid-1850's, and see what you can find out.

Art projects:

- Which part of the show did you like best? Draw a picture of it.
- When we make our puppets, we often start by sculpting the puppet's head in clay. Using clay or play-doh, try sculpting the head of one of the characters from the show. Remember, they don't have to look like OUR puppets – you should make the character look the way YOU think it should look!
- Find a book on shadow puppets and have the students each make one. A shadow screen can be made easily using a picture frame and a sheet stretched and stapled or tacked to the frame.
- 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.

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 can be 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 at first, the children often realize that it *was* funny, and we get a second wave of laughter. The most enjoyable performances we give 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.

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