

# Crabgrass Puppet Theatre

## Study Guide for African Adventure Tales!

### Koi & the Kola Nuts Anansi & the Talking Melon

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

#### The Stories

In **Koi and the Kola Nuts**, the youngest son of a chief learns that his only inheritance is a scraggly kola tree. "You do not know how to treat the son of a chief!" Koi tells his village, and decides to travel to a new home. With only a sack of kola nuts on his back, he sets out on a wonderful journey in search of his place in the world. Along the way, he meets three creatures who are in need: a snake, an army of ants, and a crocodile. All of the creatures are in dire need of kola nuts – the one thing Koi has – and Koi willingly gives away his inheritance to help the others. When Koi arrives at the next village empty-handed, no one believes that he is the son of a chief. The villagers insist that he prove himself by performing three impossible tasks. Impossible for Koi, perhaps, but not for his new friends, who seize the opportunity to repay Koi's kindness. "He truly is the son of a chief!" the people cry, and welcome him to their village.

In **Anansi the Spider**, lazy Anansi eats his way into Elephant's melon and is too bloated to crawl out. The clever trickster decides this is a perfect opportunity to have some fun, and speaks to

Elephant from inside the melon. Elephant can hardly believe his ears: "Wow! A talking melon!" Elephant takes the melon to Hippo, who is amazed: "I've never heard of a talking melon!" When Warthog hears the melon talk, he is astounded. "You have to show the King!" So Elephant sets off to demonstrate his miraculous melon to King Monkey. When the melon refuses to speak to the King, however, he becomes so angry that he kicks the melon far, far away, where it cracks open . . . and Anansi crawls out, thin again (after all that activity), and on the lookout for his next meal!

#### The Puppets

The puppets in "*African Adventure Tales*" are rod puppets. Rod puppets are puppets that are moved with sticks. Some of the puppets are worked from below on the play board, which is the highest part of the stage, and some are worked in front of the puppeteer, on the tabletop part of the stage.

We make all of the puppets and scenery. The puppet heads are sculpted in clay, then we make a plaster mold of the head and pour liquid rubber into the mold. When the rubber hardens, we have a nice hollow puppet head. The bodies are made out of wood and a type of stiff foam called ethyfoam.

We dye and print all of the fabrics and costumes in the show. Some are done with block-printing stamps that we create, some are tie-dyed using

several African methods, and some are dye-painted: we paint the colors directly onto the cloth, the way you would paint a piece of paper.

## About Folktales

### Koi and the Kola Nuts

Folktales from different parts of the world tend to have many of the same themes. “Koi and the Kola Nuts” includes two classic categories of folktale: stories in which a youngest son or daughter, cheated out of his or her inheritance, sets off to make his or her way in the world; and stories in which the main character helps those in need, and is helped by them in turn.

The character of the youngest son/daughter is a much-used feature in folktales and fairytales. **Can your students think of other stories which use this character?**

“The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship” is similar in many ways to “Koi and the Kola Nuts.” **Read that story to your students and have them discuss the similarities and differences with “Koi.”**

**Use this story format and have the students create their own stories,** individually or as a group, with someone like them as the protagonist. Where would the hero/heroine travel to? Who would they meet along the way? How are the ones they meet in need of help? What are the crises that the hero/heroine has to overcome, and how is she or he aided by the ones she has helped?

### Anansi and the Talking Melon

There are hundreds of Anansi stories. They began with the Ashanti people of West Africa and traveled to other countries, including the West Indies, which has a strong tradition of Anansi stories. Sometimes Anansi is portrayed as a

spider, sometimes as a man, and sometimes as part-spider, part-man. But Anansi is always trickster, and his stories are very similar to other trickster tales told throughout the world. **Many cultures have a trickster character. Can your students think of some?**

Br'er Rabbit (African-American)

Coyote (Native American)

Raven (Native American)

Reynard the Fox (France)

## Classroom Activities

**Read your students other Anansi folktales** and tales of other tricksters, such as Coyote: A Trickster Tale and Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest, both by Gerald McDermott. How are the Anansi, Coyote and Raven stories alike?

**Find out more about the countries of Liberia (Koi & the Kola Nuts) and Ghana (Anansi & the Talking Melon).** What kind of clothing do these people wear? What do their houses look like? Find Liberia and Ghana on a map.

**Make an African Village:** Using cardboard and construction paper, modeling clay or play-dough, create a replica of an African village. Decide what country the village is in, and research how the houses look. What shape are the houses in? What colors are they? Are the houses laid out in a circle, in a square, in lines? Are there trees and plants in the village, and what do they look like? What is the name of your village, and what does the name mean?

**Learn about the Animals of West Africa:** In “Anansi and The Talking Melon,” Elephant shows his wonderful melon to three animals: Warthog, Hippo, and Monkey. Find out what other animals are found in West Africa. Have each student draw a picture of one animal, bird or reptile. Put a map

of Africa on the wall, and tape the animal pictures in the area of the continent where they can be found.

**African Patterns and Symbols:** African art, textiles, clothing, pottery and carvings are full of patterns and symbols. Many of these have specific meanings. Adinkra are visual symbols created by the Ashanti people of Ghana and the Gyaman of Cote d'Ivoire, both in West Africa. They represent concepts and wise sayings. Find a website with the Adinkra symbols and meanings, show some to the class, and discuss how the symbol connects to the meaning.

**Create your own Adinkra symbol:** This could be approached from either end: (a) draw a symbol and then decide on a meaning that relates to what they have drawn, or (b) decide on a concept or saying, and draw a symbol that represents it.

**Block printing:** We used block-printing and stamping techniques to create some of the costumes and scenery in our show. Younger children can sponge-print or potato-print basic shapes to promote the concept of printing on paper or fabric.

**Find out what a kola nut is** and how they have been used.

**Make a kola nut tree** from cardboard and construction paper.

**Create silhouettes of scenes from the show:** trace or draw the characters and scenic elements onto black construction paper. Cut out the silhouettes and glue them to white paper. Post the scenes in order on the wall, and use them to reinforce the sequences of the stories.

**Visit Crabgrass Puppet Theatre online at [www.crabgrasspuppets.com](http://www.crabgrasspuppets.com)!**

**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, Inc.  
P.O. Box 630  
Melville, NY 11747

## Recommended Books

Aardema, Verna, *Koi and the Kola Nuts: A Tale from Liberia*, Atheneum/Anne Schwartz Books, 1999. Illustrated by Joe Cepeda.

Gleeson, Brian, *Koi and the Kola Nuts*, Simon & Schuster, 1992. Illustrated by Reynolds Ruffins. This is also available as an audiobook in a Rabbit Ears Production, with Whoopi Goldberg narrating.

Shulevitz, Uri, *The Fool of the World and the Flying Ship: A Russian Tale*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968. This is a Russian tale similar to *Koi & the Kola Nuts*.

Kimmel, Eric A., *Anansi and the Talking Melon*, Holiday House, 1995.

McDermott, Gerald, *Coyote: A Trickster Tale from the American Southwest*, HMH Books for Young Readers, 1999. A trickster story to compare to *Anansi* stories.

McDermott, Gerald, *Raven: A Trickster Tale from the Pacific Northwest*, HMH Books for Young Readers, 2001. A trickster story to compare to *Anansi* stories.

Kimmel, Eric A., *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock*, Holiday House, New York, 1988.

Arkhurst, Joyce Cooper, *The Adventures of Spider: West African Folktales*, Little, Brown & Co., 1964

Addo, Peter Eric Adotey, *How the Spider Became Bald: Folktales and Legends from West Africa*, Morgan Reynolds Inc., Greensboro, NC, 1993

Courlander, Harold, and Herzog, George, *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories*, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1947.

Appiah, Peggy, *Tales of an Ashanti Father*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1967.

## **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:**

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.

### **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: [info@encoreperforming.com](mailto:info@encoreperforming.com).