

OREGON SHADOW THEATRE P.O. Box 18181 Portland, OR 97218
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Anansi the Spider -- Study Materials

“The Oregon Shadow Theatre team of Deb Chase and Mick Doherty... stretches the imagination ... expands cross-cultural awareness.”

Seattle Post-Intelligencer

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Formed in 1983, Oregon Shadow Theatre performs throughout the United States in theaters, performing art centers, schools, and libraries. Deb Chase designs and constructs the shadow puppets. Deb is nationally recognized for her innovative shadow puppetry, and is the shadow puppet consultant to the Puppeteers of America. During a performance Deb manipulates the puppets behind a translucent backlit screen while providing voices. Mick Doherty performs live music and sound effects, and acts as storyteller and voice actor. Mick also performs with the Cascadia Folk Quartet and The Trail Band. OST has twice received the UNIMA Citation for Excellence in the Art of Puppetry, the award created by the late Jim Henson.

ABOUT THE ART FORM

Shadow puppetry is considered the oldest form of puppetry in the world. It began thousands of years ago in China and India and is a living folk art in China and Southeast Asia -- most notably the islands of Indonesia. In China the shadow plays are often folk-tales and legends of the past, many based on Chinese opera themes. In Indonesia the plays are taken from two religious epics featuring struggles between good and evil. Turkey and Greece also have a history of shadow puppetry, where plays are based on working class life and contain much physical comedy and magic. In Western Europe shadow puppetry enjoyed popularity during the 1800's when the art of cutting silhouettes out of paper was fashionable.

Traditional shadow puppets are flat and made of leather. Areas within the puppet are punched out with sharp knives. These areas suggest facial features and help define clothing. The puppets are made from separate pieces and joined together with wire or string. They are controlled by long rods and moved behind a white translucent screen made from paper or cloth. A lamp on the puppeteer's side of the stage provides the light. The audience on the other side sees the moving shadows. Cutout areas within the figures allow light to shine through. Today, shadow puppets may be made from a variety of materials, including paper, wire, colored transparent plastic and found objects such as dried plants, glass jewels, feathers and even kitchen utensils. Contemporary shadow theatre might employ a variety of specialized lighting effects, including various theatrical lighting instruments, overhead projectors, reflected light, hand held lights and projected film.

ANANSI THE SPIDER by Oregon Shadow Theatre

Anansi the Spider is a West African trickster character. There are hundreds of Anansi tales and in keeping with oral tradition there are often different versions of the same story. Anansi is known in the Caribbean and United States as well. West Africans, taken by force to work as slaves, brought the stories of Anansi with them. In Georgia and other southern coastal states Anansi became known as Aunt Nancy or Miss Nancy. Like all trickster characters, Anansi is greedy, sometimes smart and sometimes foolish. Some of his stories are creation myths. By tricking the sky god Anansi is credited with placing the sun and moon in the sky. By trying to keep a pot of wisdom all to himself he accidentally drops it, which is the reason wisdom spread around the world.

West African storytelling has a tradition of call and response. In Oregon Shadow Theatre's production, Mick, the storyteller, leads the audience in a call and response song to help wake up the people of the village. The village people do not want to go to work so the storyteller tells them a story about how Anansi's laziness got him into a lot of trouble. In the tale Anansi meets a River Goblin and learns a magic fishing song. He outwits a Chimpanzee who is looking for a fight. Although Anansi is clever his greed and laziness are eventually his downfall when he tries to steal food from the family garden.

This production is filled with humor, songs, colorful puppets based on African designs and live music on an African hand drum, marimba and thumb piano. Before the play, Mick introduces the musical instruments. After the play trick puppets and special lighting effects are demonstrated.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Anansi- the name means spider in the Asante (Ashanti) language of southern Ghana.

Conole- Anansi's wife

Brother and Sister- Anansi's and Conole's children

Chameleon- a friend of Anansi's

Turtle- a friend of Anansi's

River Goblin- a magic creature who sings a magic fishing song

Chimpanzee- a big strong character who likes to challenge others to a fight

Medicine Man- the local doctor

VOCABULARY

ancestor- A person from whom one is descended, especially if more remote than a grandparent; a forebear

riddle- A question or statement requiring thought to answer or understand; a conundrum. Another definition is from Jan Brunvand, who writes that "folk riddles are traditional questions with unexpected (albeit traditional) answers---verbal puzzles (although some involve writing) that demonstrate the cleverness of the questioner and challenge the wit of the audience." [From Brunvand's *The Study of American Folklore*, p. 89].

trickster- **1.** One that swindles or plays tricks. **2.** Often a **Trickster** is a mischievous or roguish figure in myth or folklore, often an animal, who typically makes up for physical weakness with cunning and subversive humor.

Shadow puppetry definitions:

Contrast- to compare by showing differences.

Light Source- the place where the light comes from, such as the sun, a ceiling light or a lamp.

Opaque- when a material is opaque, light cannot shine through it.

Shadow- the dark image of an object that blocks the light.

Silhouette- an outline drawing of an object filled in with some uniform color.

Translucent—When a material is translucent, light can shine through it but objects behind it cannot be clearly seen.

Transparent—When a material is transparent, light can shine through it and objects behind it can be clearly seen.

FURTHER READING

Worlds of Shadow/ Shadow Puppetry in the Classroom, by David and Donna Wisniewski (Teachers Ideas Press, Englewood, Colorado, 1997)

Note: This book and other books on shadow puppetry are available from the Puppeteers of America bookstore online: www.puppeteers.org

The Adventures of Spider, by Joyce Cooper Arkhurst

Anansi the Spider, by Gerald McDermitt

The Hat Shaking Dance, by Harold Courlander

Anansi the Spider Man, by Philip Sherlock

Anansi and the Moss-covered Rock, by Eric Kimmel

African Folktales, by Jessie Alford Nunn

Many libraries contain books on puppet making that often contain a section on shadow puppets. You may also find library books that are entirely on shadow puppets.

Classroom Activities-

A website for study of trickster tales such as Anansi (or Ananse) and Fables:

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=240

The activities marked with an asterisk are adapted from the above website.

* trickster tales are short narratives that use animal characters with human characteristics to convey folk wisdom and to help us understand human nature and human behavior. Trickster tales often celebrate values or actions that are disapproved of by society but that may be necessary for the survival and success of the small and weak; the stories allow us to see the complexities of the human character. Ask students what they think about the Spider character in the story, whether they like him and his actions, and why? Why is Spider called a "trickster"?

- Ask the students how Anansi is like a human. Is he hard working or is he lazy. Is he smart or foolish? Does he look like a spider or a human or both?
- How is Conole different from Anansi? Is she hard working or lazy? Is she generous or greedy?

*These stories were originally passed down through oral tradition and were eventually written down. Stories change when transferred orally between generations and cultures.

* Discuss with students the differences between telling and writing stories, and ask them what the advantages and disadvantages are of the oral and written forms.

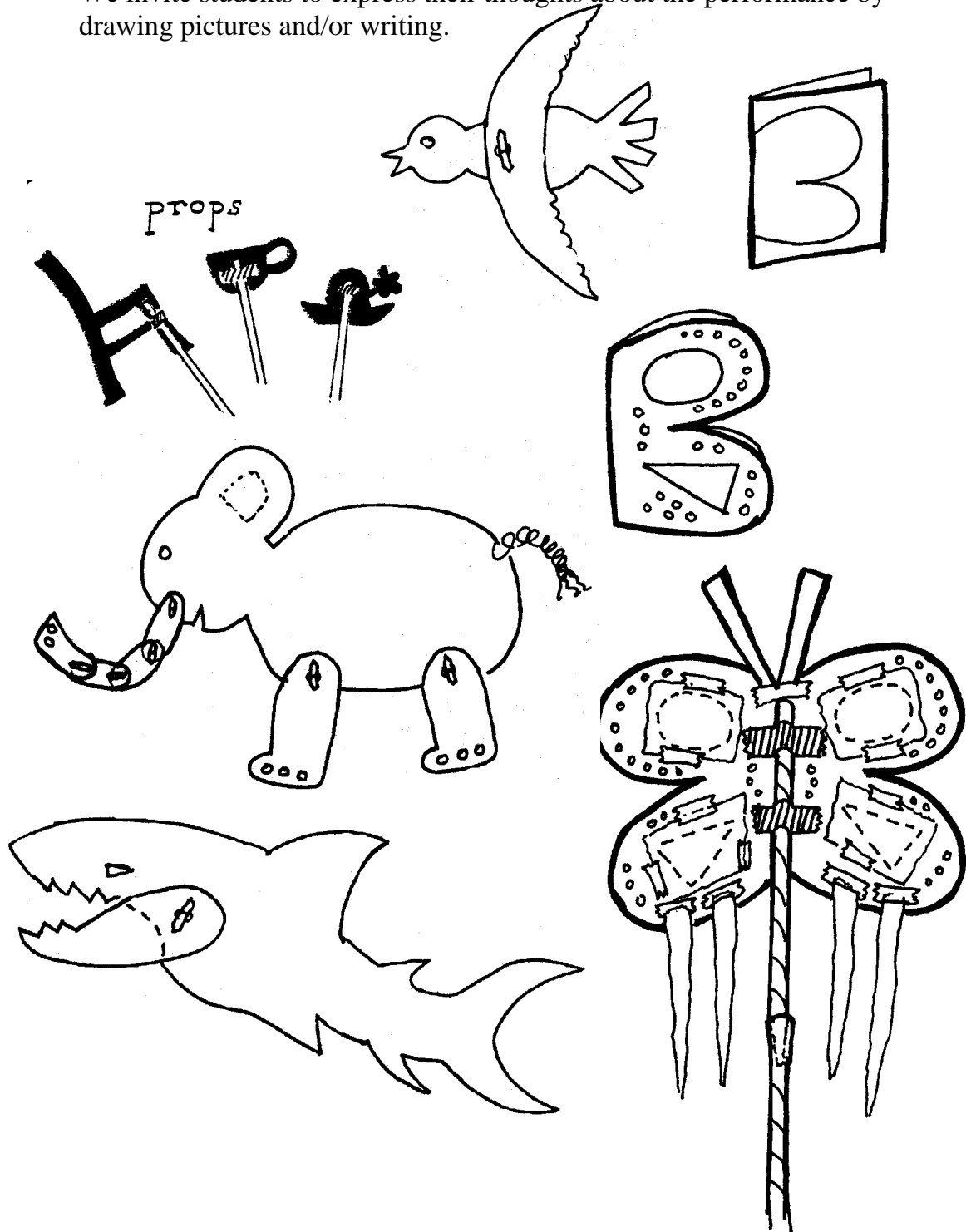
*To illustrate to students how stories change when passed down orally, have them play the Operator game: Have students sit in a circle and tell one student a secret message. The students then repeat the message by whispering it in another student's ear. Ask the last student hearing the message to say it out loud, and see how it has changed from the original message.

After playing the Operator game, you can ask students to retell the parts of the Oregon Shadow Theatre's Anansi play and note how the story has changed in the retelling, or have them write or draw the story to see how it becomes fixed after being committed to paper.

Other activities:

- Ask the students how the use of sound effects enhanced the story.
- Have the students make up their own stories of Anansi the spider

- Read other African trickster stories such as stories about Rabbit and Turtle. Read trickster tales from other cultures such as the Native American characters, Coyote and Raven.
- Ask the students if the stories would have the same effect if the animal characters were replaced by humans.
- Have the students create their own shadow puppet show. Follow directions for “The Undersea Parade” or create a new play using the same concepts.
- We invite students to express their thoughts about the performance by drawing pictures and/or writing.



Making Shadow Puppets in the Classroom

The Simplest puppets and easiest to manipulate are those controlled with on vertical rod. This simple technique can work with a great variety of creatures and characters, from dinosaurs to Old MacDonald and his farm animals. Here is an example of vertical rod puppets:

THE UNDERSEA PARADE

The ocean comes to life with colorful sea creatures

Simple colorful puppets with 1 vertical rod control

Materials: Heavy Black Construction Paper - 9" x 12"

Art tissue paper - assorted bright colors

Chalk

Oblong shapes made of poster board - approx. 4" x 7"

Transparent tape

Masking tape 1"

Plastic non-flex straws - 73/4" (Costco sells Transparent straws in bulk - approx. \$6.50 for 2500)

Hole punch - regular size and optional small punch (available in stationary stores)

Scissors - any scissors will work but Fiskars with points are the best

Music- tape or CD player with parade music and/or

Octopus' Garden or Yellow Submarine by the Beatles

Blue theatrical filter/gel - a heat resistant plastic bought from theater supply stores (optional)

Shadow Screen and Light

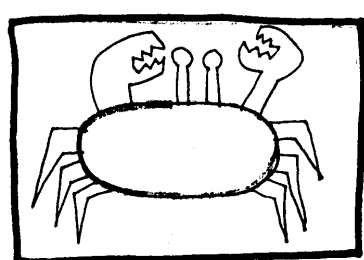
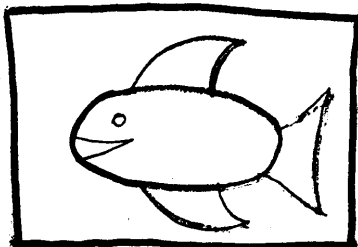
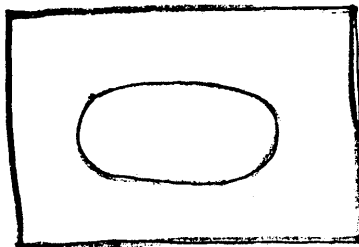
Prepare a shadow screen with undersea scenery. Leave plenty of room for the action of the puppets. Scenery can be made of black construction paper and colored tissue paper (starfish, treasure chest, sea anemone, ocean waves etc.)

Puppet Construction

Have students decide which sea creature each will make, then place the oblong in the center of the black construction paper and trace with chalk. This becomes the body of the sea creature or head of an octopus or jelly fish. The shapes help the students make a large puppet with room for design.

Have Students draw body parts for their creatures: e.g. fins for a fish, pinchers and legs for a crab.

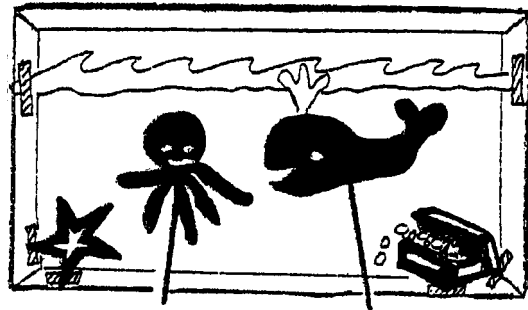
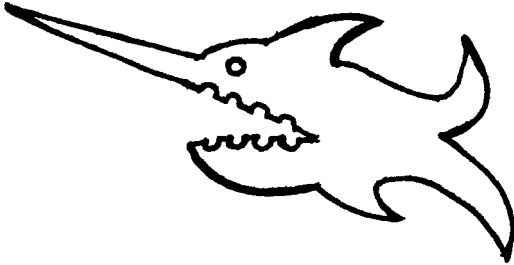
(Students that want to make creatures like sea snakes, mermaids, sea horses, etc. will need to draw their own body shapes. Encourage students to fill the page with their drawing)



(Puppet Construction Continued)

Have students:

- Use **scissors** to cut their figure out, and then use the **hole punch** for the eyes and also for detail and designs inside their figure. (**Note:** Hole punches of different sizes are great for adding interest to the puppet. Colored tissue paper can be taped over the larger holes.)
- cut the mouth out. Teeth can be made with hole punch punching half-holes along edge of mouth.
- Draw simple designs in the interior of the creature with chalk.
- Cut out interior designs (If the hole punch will reach the shape a hole can be punched first to make it easier to cut out interior designs with scissors).
- Add color to the puppet. Tape colored tissue paper over the cut out shapes with transparent tape. Long strips of tissue paper taped off the edges of the creature's fins provide incidental movement when manipulated behind the screen. Long strips of tissue paper can be tentacles for a jellyfish or octopus. Pieces of a paper lace doily make beautiful fins when taped off the edge.



Straw Rod construction

Have students:

- Put two or three straws together to make a long rod by crimping the end of one straw (along length) and inserting it approximately one inch into the end of another straw. (Add a third straw if more length is needed.) A small piece of magic tape wrapped around joints will keep the straws from coming apart.
- Place the rod vertically on the puppet, attaching with **masking tape** above the middle for balance, trying to avoid taping over a cut out area. (Always use masking tape when attaching rods). When the lights are out these puppets look good facing either direction -
- it doesn't matter which side of the puppet the tape is on (this point may be necessary to demonstrate to the students).

Manipulation and Performance

- Puppets are held at the **end** of the straws so that hands don't cast shadows!
- Students line up at the edge of the screen and **press** their sea creature against the screen and "swim" across to music. If the puppeteer rocks their wrist back and forth the "fish" can flip its tail fin in a lifelike manner. If the students are performing on a tabletop screen they will need to kneel to prevent casting a shadow.
- Plays can be created. Experiment by giving creatures names and having them introduce themselves to each other.
- **Have students move their puppet up and down to show that they are talking.**- A big fish can magically eat a small fish by placing the small fish behind the big one as it "eats it". If the center of the big fish is cut out you can see the little fish inside the belly.