

DAVID PRATHER

Prather's Poetry Jam

Art Form: Theatre/Storytelling

Style: Contemporary

Culture: North American/European

MEET THE ARTIST:

David Prather is a talented and charismatic actor who has two decades of experience working with young audiences. His performance style employs a blend of stand-up comedy, improvisation and audience interaction. He has been on the Music Center Education roster for many years as a workshop and residency artist and performer of his solo assemblies, *World of Myths* and *Prather's Poetry Jam*. Mr. Prather has hosted the popular *Open House* at the Hollywood Bowl since 1997. Also a playwright, his play "John and Juan" has been presented by the Tony-award winning Alley Theater in Texas, as well as at the Gene Autry Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Los Angeles appearances include roles at the Los Angeles Theatre Center and two seasons with the Mark Taper Forum Repertory Company. Mr. Prather is a graduate of Princeton University and the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Prather's Poetry Jam is a high-energy performance for young audiences, designed to stimulate an interest in poetry and language. Drawing on a diverse array of poets from Shel Silverstein and Jack Prelutsky to A.A. Milne, and including such American classics as "Casey at the Bat" and "This Land is Your Land," the show serves as an overview and introduction to poetry, metaphor, imagery and meter. Audience participation, humor, fast pacing, pratfalls and props make this performance a language "jam." From an entrance (safely helmeted) on a razor scooter to the donning of a sandwich board, from jumping rope to juggling boxes, the audience is engaged as Prather demonstrates the rhythm and rhyme of poetry. There is definitely "joy in Mudville" with this home run performance.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Poetry is more than rhyming words linked together in a particular format with a specific meter (rhythm patterns that can be identified and measured). Through imagination and imagery, through figures of speech such as metaphor, assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia, poetry takes ordinary words and shapes them into a message that surpasses the literal meaning of the words. The verbal art of poetry aims straight for the heart of the listener, providing them with an emotional experience that isn't always evoked from a simple prose narrative.

Verse is a constant in everyday life, from commercial jingles to children's rhymes to our own inadvertent speeches (i.e., "We're going to the store. Out the door!") Poetry probably originated in early civilizations as a tool used to convey oral histories and stories, and as ritualistic language for rites of passage. Many modern classroom teachers continue to use poetry to help students remember lessons; they find that rhythm and rhyme provide valuable memory triggers for younger listeners.

Poems performed in Poetry Jam are mainly contemporary poems that use modern language to speak about everyday experiences with unusual twists. A visit to an ice cream store, watching television and a baseball game all show how poems can present images that resonate long after the performance ends. Poets represented include: Shel Silverstein (1932-1999) and Jack Prelutsky (1940-), two contemporary American poets; Alan Alexander Milne (A.A. Milne 1882-1956), an English writer best known for *Winnie the Pooh*; and American poets including Woodrow Wilson "Woody" Guthrie (1912-1967), a songwriter and folk poet whose words and songs spoke for the working class and the unions during the Great Depression; Ernest Lawrence Thayer (1863-1940), whose *Casey at the Bat* was first published in 1888 as a humor piece in the *San Francisco Examiner*; and Carl Sandburg (1878-1967), a Pulitzer-prize winning poet who created new poetic forms as he wrote about life and living in America.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What is a poem? What elements turn a simple sentence or statement into a poem? (rhythm, rhyme, imagery)
- Have you ever written a poem? Can you remember what it was about? What rhyming words did you use?
- What was your favorite poem in this performance? Why? Do you remember the poet's name? Have you read any other poems written by that poet?
- List some of your favorite poems. Do you share the same favorites with classmates? Can you recite any parts of the poems you like the best?
- Discuss various contexts you have with poetry during the day - on television, on the playground, in class, during bedtime stories, etc. How many different ways can you remember?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

A *metaphor* is a figure of speech in which a word that represents one thing is used to describe another. A *simile* is a figure of speech which uses "like" or "as" to compare one thing to another. Both are used often in poetry and literary writing to help create mental images that convey the written message through strong visual concepts. Following are examples of simile and metaphors. Ask students to identify which are simile and which are metaphors. Ask students to create their own metaphors or simile.

From "Casey at the Bat:"

From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,
Like the beating of the storm-waves on a stern and distant shore;

From "This Land is Your Land:"

As I was walking that ribbon of highway

From Shel Silverstein's "The Dragon of Grindly Grun:"

I breathe fire as hot as the sun;

From A.A. Milne's "The Mirror:"

Between the woods the afternoon
Is fallen in a golden swoon.

Legend:

- ⊗ Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▮ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⊗ Help students define and understand the following figures of speech:

assonance: repetition of the same vowel sound

Example: How now, brown cow.

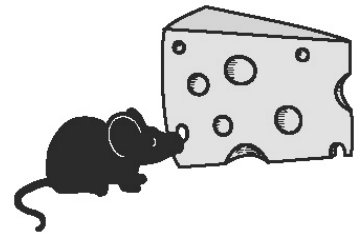
alliteration: repetition of the same consonant sound

Example: Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

Then have them try to find or create one or two lines of poetry that use one of these figures of speech.

- ❖ Ask students to select a favorite poem to read or present to the class. They should be able to name the title, poet and country of origin, and the time period in which it was written. Students should concentrate on identifying and expressing the emotional tone of the poem, paying attention to interpretive aspects such as irony or sarcasm, etc.

- ⇒ After students recite their poem to the class, help students discuss the meanings in each poem, and what importance it might have for the students. Be sure to point out and discuss any phrases that create images or emotions in the minds and hearts of the students.



- ▮ Poetry often reflects the historical era in which it was written, and can often shine light on the styles, values, challenges and ideas of that time. Select a poem that was written during a specific time period (drawn from classroom curriculum) and examine it to see what it says about any political or cultural issues of the time. For instance, "This Land is Your Land," written by Woody Guthrie in the 1930s, reflected the fight of the working class and their struggle to claim their own piece of the American dream through the establishment of workers unions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Perrine, Laurence, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*. Harcourt Brace, New York, NY, 1992.

Silverstein, Shel, *A Light in The Attic*. Harper & Row, New York, NY: 1981.

Milne, A.A., *When We Were Very Young*. E.P Dutton, New York, NY: 1924.

Author: Kathryn Johnson

© 2004, The Music Center of Los Angeles County - www.musiccenter.org/education