

# OLGA LOYA

**Art Form: Storytelling**

**Style: Contemporary**

**Culture: Latin America**

## MEET THE ARTIST:

In 1979, East Los Angeles native **Olga Loya** was living in Northern California, working as a teacher and collecting and writing stories. While organizing a local storytelling festival, Olga discovered the world of professional storytellers and decided to become one herself. Since then, in addition to performing, Olga has pursued an intensive study of storytelling. This involved attending theater and storytelling workshops and symposiums, as well as working with a variety of storytelling master teachers. Starting with five stories in 1979, Olga now has over one hundred stories in her repertoire. She has performed in schools and universities, on radio and TV, and at festivals throughout California. She was also featured at the first Latin American Storytelling Festival in Guadalajara, Mexico. Currently, Olga lives in San Jose, California where she continues to collect, write and tell stories.

## ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Olga Loya performs bilingual Latin American stories and tales from around the world, entertaining her audiences while introducing them to other cultures. She likes stories that combine power with humor - "intense stories that touch the heart." Her stories are populated with heroes, 'sheros,' and cunning tricksters that can outwit even devils and death. Olga's performances usually include a personal or family story - often drawn from her own experiences growing up in East Los Angeles. She also collaborates with the audience to create a story. Movement, audience participation, masks, and songs are standard in her performances. Stories are told bilingually, with Spanish and English segments blending together to create a seamless and richly textured experience that everyone can enjoy!

Olga has three different shows:

In **Stories from Latin America**, Loya brings to life stories from the barrio of East Los Angeles to the many countries of Latin America, using the word, drum chants and song. These family stories, folktales, myths and legends can be performed with segments in Spanish and English or in Spanish.

**Let's Work Together** - The power of community and people working together are two of the themes reflected in these multicultural stories of Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas.

Geared for middle and high school, **Dancing Through La Vida** uses dancing, music and story to tell tales from the East Los Angeles barrio and Latin American Folklore; and Love and Ghost Stories.

## PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Latin America covers a large territory - including all of South America, Central America and Mexico, as well as the islands of the Caribbean - and its cultural heritage is complex. The cultures of the native people, the influence of the Spanish, British and French colonialists, the contributions of the black Africans have all combined to produce the rich mixture that is Latin America.

In the centuries before colonization, three important indigenous cultures flourished in Latin America. These were the Maya and the Aztec civilizations of Mexico and Central America, and the Inca civilization of the Andes mountain region in western South America. Because these civilizations evolved and flourished prior to the arrival of Christopher Columbus, Hernan Cortez and other Spanish explorers, these civilizations are sometimes called Pre-Columbian. These civilizations were as remarkable as the early ones in Egypt, Mesopotamia and China. They had large kingdoms and empires, great monuments and cities, highly developed art, science, and writing. Before the arrival of the Spanish, the population of the area now known as Mexico was thought to have been over 15 million people!

Our knowledge of the ancient cultures is limited, since the Incas kept no written records, and most of the original writings of the Aztec and Mayas were destroyed by the colonizing powers. In one Mayan town, a Spanish bishop burned an entire library of painted books on history, religion, science, mathematics and astronomy. Only four Mayan books remain, mostly dealing with astronomy and astrology. A few Aztec bark paper books

also survived, though like those of the Maya, most were destroyed. Some Mayan and Aztec storytelling records do exist, written from memory many years after the originals were destroyed. Also, some explorers and missionaries of the time wrote descriptions of the myths, legends, rituals and stories they heard from the native people. In light of all that was lost, it is clear that oral tradition of storytelling is of great importance in helping to preserve these ancient cultures.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Which story did you enjoy the most? Why?
- What character did you like best? Describe him or her.
- Think of one story that impressed you. What thoughts came to mind? What feelings did you have?
- What lessons did you learn through the experience of the stories?
- How did Olga use language to make the stories more authentic?
- How does Olga use her voice (pitch, rhythm, tempo) and language (English, Spanish, expressions, local dialect) to portray different characters?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

Stories teach us about other cultures, past and present, as well as our own cultural heritage. Through stories we visit other places, times, and meet a variety other people. We develop compassion and empathy as others' problems and victories become our own. Stories teach us about ethics and integrity, by showing us characters who demonstrate these qualities as well as characters who don't. We begin to associate consequences with choices and actions. In a powerful way, they help us understand the genesis and purpose of our society's traditions. Stories help us explore the mysteries of life and living. They give us new ways to think about our fears, hopes, and explore our concerns and questions. Storytelling is a creative act for both the teller and the listener. Storytelling promotes language development and creative writing skills; oral communication, listening and concentration; form and pattern recognition, as well as metaphorical thinking and visualization.

Tell (or read) the class a story from another culture, then discuss the story.

Who was the main character in the story? What made him/her the hero? What was the hero's problem? How did he/she solve it? What did the hero learn in the story?

Did this story have a lesson or a moral? What was it? Do you agree or disagree with it? Why?

Do you know someone whose culture is represented in this legend or folklore? Is the culture in the story different from your culture or heritage? In what ways is it the same? Are the values ones you can relate to?

Does the story remind you of something that has happened to you? A time when you were afraid? Heroic? Jealous? Brave? Victorious? Encourage students to share their own stories with the class.

Legend:

- ☉ Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- \* Connections, Relations, Applications

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ☉ To explore family folklore, ask your students to share a family story. They may tell stories about themselves, about other family members, even about pets. These may be stories they've heard around the dinner table, at family reunions or holiday celebrations, or during a quiet moment with their grandparents. Encourage students to ask their parents for help in remembering stories to share. Remember that though family stories are usually based on true incidents, fact, fiction and exaggeration are often combined in the telling. The older the story, the more likely it has "improved" in the telling! Encourage students (with the parents' permission) to bring special objects that relate to their story, e.g. photograph, lucky charm, souvenir, a household utensil, family memento, etc. to share.
- ▶ Combine archeology with storytelling by having students collect objects that represent their cultural history. Students might collect photographs, cooking or eating utensils (chopsticks), clothing (wooden shoes), musical instruments (maracas), toys (dreidles), or any object that evokes their culture. Each student then tells the story of the objects they collected, how the objects came to be in the family's possession, how they are used, etc. In this way, students can tell the class a story of their own heritage.
- ❖ Olga Loya often tells *pourquoi* stories - stories that explain how and why something came to be the way it is. To explore this kind of story, review a *pourquoi* story that Olga told in her performance, or read or tell your students a how-why story, such as *How the Sun and the Moon Got Into the Sky* (a story in many cultures), *How the Rabbit Grew Ears* (Nicaragua), or *Why the Turtle Shell Looks Like a Jigsaw Puzzle* (Africa).

Ask students to write their own *pourquoi* story. Stories may explain how animals came to have certain physical characteristics, such as: Why does a lion have a bushy mane or a loud roar? Why does a tiger have stripes? Why do birds sing? Why do peacocks have eyes on their tails? They can also write stories explaining human characteristics (how people learned to smile, cry, laugh; why they have teeth, hair arms, etc.) or natural phenomena (earthquakes, thunder, waves, rain, mountains stars, etc.) Use your imagination!

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

*Favorite Folktales from Around the World*, ed. Jane Yolen. Pantheon Books, New York: 1986.

*Twice Upon a Time*, by Judy Sierra and Robert Kaminski. The H.W. Wilson Company, Bronx, New York: 1989.