

ART OF PUPPETS AND MARIONETTES

Myths of the Aztecs

Art Form: Theatre
Style: Contemporary
Culture: Aztec

MEET THE ARTIST:

Jim Gamble, founding director of the **Art of Puppets and Marionettes**, is an internationally respected puppet designer and performer known for his appealing productions and beautifully crafted puppets. His dynamic company, founded in 1972 and composed of accomplished puppeteers and puppet makers, has an eclectic repertoire that includes *Peter and the Wolf*, *Carnival of the Animals*, *The Nutcracker*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Tales of the Ashanti* and *Myths of the Aztecs*. Each production features familiar classical music or an original score. Strongly committed to education, the company performs in hundreds of California schools annually and in theatres and festivals throughout the U.S., Europe, Asia and the Middle East. In 2001, Jim Gamble was the only American to perform at the Obratsov Puppet Theatre in Moscow in celebration of 100 Years of Russian Puppetry. National appearances include the Children's Theatre Series in Hawaii and the International Children's Festival in San Diego. Among the company's many awards are the *Parents Choice* and *Golden Apple* awards for their video series, and the *President's Award* from the *Puppeteers of America*.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Through the lens of a giant magnifying glass and with the help of an amazing array of shadow and rod puppets, this delightful production brings to life the ancient and fascinating Aztec culture. *The Myths of the Aztecs* is an imaginative mix of music and story that unfolds through the conversations of a young boy and an archeologist. Speaking in Spanish and English and using historical and archeological elements and facts, two puppeteers present the story of the Aztecs journey from Atzlan to Tenochtitlan, and the myth of how music was brought to the Aztecs. The performance includes a lively cast of Aztec characters and gods. The audience is invited to learn a song and Aztec words, and to participate in the young boy's journey of discovery.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Myths are stories that almost all ancient cultures created in order to make sense of the world around them. Initially told orally and passed down from one generation to the next, myths expressed the beliefs of a culture and attempted to explain the forces of nature such as rain or drought, the flash of lightning or destructive storms. Today we have the earth and social sciences to help us understand our world, but long ago gods and goddesses were believed to have the power to create life, order death, protect people against famine by assuring abundant harvests, explain a society's laws and festivals, and model human behavior.

Originally, the Aztecs were a small tribe from northern Mexico who settled in the Valley of Mexico in 1250 and established the city of Tenochtitlan in 1345. Built on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco, Tenochtitlan grew into the largest, cleanest and most beautiful city of its time, with floating gardens, an intricate system of canals and a causeway to the mainland. The Aztecs built beautiful temples honoring their gods. They valued discipline and loved music and poetry. They were also highly militaristic, and grew wealthy and powerful by conquering their neighbors through war, exacting tributes from them. In 1519, Spanish conquistadores led by Hernán Cortés arrived on the coast of Mexico. Within two years the Aztecs were conquered, their cities plundered. Many died from diseases the Spanish brought.

Puppet theatre has its roots in 17th century Italy. At that time, troupes of traveling actors created characters for performance that evolved into standard puppet characters. There are many types of puppets and their names indicate the ways in which they operate. Hand puppets are manipulated by the puppeteers hand, rod puppets are worked with sticks, and shadow puppets work with the use of light and its projected shadow. Marionettes move freely, and are manipulated by a combination of strings, wires, or rods attached to hand-held controls above the puppet.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What was your favorite part of *The Myth of the Aztecs*? Why?
- What kinds of feelings did you have as you watched the performance? Did the music, sound effects and different languages enrich the stories? How?
- What did you think of the Aztec gods? Did you have a favorite? Why?
- Have you ever heard Spanish and English used together in a performance? When? Could you say the words in Nahuatl (the Aztec language)?
- What did you think about the puppets in this performance? How did they help you to understand the stories? Have you seen puppets like this before?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - VISUAL ARTS:

The Aztecs created a language composed of pictures called glyphs, which they used to represent objects or ideas. Instead of words and sentences, they created scenes with their glyphs. These scenes were used for many reasons, such as recording their history, preserving and teaching their religion, keeping track of the stars and planetary movements, mapping land they owned and noting tributes they collected. The glyphs were drawn on paper made from bark. Sheets were glued together to make a long accordion-like book that the Aztecs called a codex.

Have students create their own picture language in which they make a series of glyphs to represent people, ideas or objects important to them. On one large piece of paper, have students draw 10-15 glyphs and then label each to remember what they represent. On another piece of paper, have students use their glyphs to create one to five scenes in which they tell some kind of story or record an event. Once the scenes are created, ask students to share their codices with each other to see if they can decipher each others stories.

Legend:

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

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ❖ Hold a storytelling hour with your class using some of their favorite myths, fairy tales, or stories from contemporary literature. Ask students to select a character from one of the stories to make as a puppet. On a simple puppet stage or platform in the front of your class, have students use their puppets to pantomime the action of the story as you read along. Or, have students take on the voices of the puppet characters and bring the story to life in a puppet play.
- ⇒ Have your students read a creation myth from another culture such as Egypt, Native America, Vietnam, Africa or India. Ask them to share their version with the class, then compare these versions with an Aztec creation myth. Discuss their differences and similarities.
- ▶ On a map, identify and label the places in South and North America that Spain explored and then colonized in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. Name the peoples who were conquered.
- ⇒ Living together as friends is one lesson in cultural diversity we all must learn. How many different languages do the students in your classroom speak? Find out how to say friend in Nahuatl and as many other languages as possible. Make a list on the board and practice the pronunciation in the various languages. Have students create a glyph that symbolizes "friend."



BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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- Stein, R. Conrad. *The Aztec Empire*. New York: Benchmark Books, 1996.
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