

THE CHAMELEONS

Mime Over Matter

Art Form: Theatre
Style: Contemporary
Culture: American

MEET THE ARTIST:

The Chameleons are *Keith Berger* and *Sharon Diskin*. When they were children, they didn't dream about being mimes when they grew up! Both were drawn to the theatre, studied acting, and appeared in dramatic productions. As teenagers they both attended a mime concert by world-famous artist Marcel Marceau. Marceau's ability to create characters without words had tremendous impact upon them and opened up a new world of expression and artistry. Keith sought formal training at The American Mime Theatre in New York City and became one of the very first street mimes. Sharon began her mime work with the Oberlin Mime Players. They met and began working as a team in 1985 and have since toured throughout Europe and North America. Their performance style features strong emotions and natural characters involved in real-life dramas. *The Chameleons* are masters of traditional mime illusions and acclaimed for their original mime repertoire. Artistic collaborators as well as husband and wife, their performances demonstrate that silence, indeed, is golden.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

Mime Over Matter is a series of short mime vignettes, some accompanied by music and sound effects. During the show, the differences between mime and pantomime are demonstrated. Mime is the language of feelings; pantomime is the creation of imaginary objects, places, and characters. When elements of mime and pantomime are successfully combined, the result is a work that is telling and beautiful. Traditional mime illusions such as 'the rope' and 'the box,' as well as chances for audience participation are incorporated into the program. From the comic to the dramatic, *Mime Over Matter* explores a spectrum of characters, human feelings and relationships.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Mime is one of the earliest mediums of self-expression. There is evidence that earliest man used mime to express, in dramatic form, his religions, his symbols, his myths, his traditions, and his cycles. The first use of mime as a part of organized theatre was in the Orient, where mimed action has been a part of the national theatres of Japan and China since their beginnings. The Greeks were probably the first to use mime as an art form in and of itself, though strongly connected to dance. The Romans continued the use of mime after the fall of Greece.

During the Middle Ages mime had two outlets. The first was the traveling jester, who was a master of mime, song, and improvisation. The second was found in the church dramas, especially in the miracle plays.

The Renaissance brought about a rebirth of mime as a significant dramatic form. In Italy, mime was an important part of the traveling Commedia in the 16th and 17th centuries. In other countries by 1800, mime had become a familiar medium for dramatic entertainment. Noh Theatre in Japan, and melodramas in France and America provided stages for mime. The Frenchman Jean-Gaspard Debureau transformed what had once been a crude, slapstick art form into real theatre: he created stories with realistic scenes, fully developed characters, and plots about everyday life.

When Debureau died, his son Charles took his place in the theatre and began the formal teaching of mime as a systematized technique. After World War I, at the Vieux Columbiere school, Jacques Copeau continued the teaching of traditional French mime to students, among them Etienne Decroux, who went on to create a modern system of mime technique with theories, exercises, and specific illusions. One of Decroux's students, world-famous mime Marcel Marceau, inspired an international enthusiasm for the art form.

Today, mime performances all over the world continue to delight hundreds of thousands of people in this tradition of theatre spanning 2,500 years.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What was your favorite mime vignette from *Mime Over Matter*?
- Did you need words to understand the meanings in the scenes that did not use dialogue?
- What mime illusions did Keith and Sharon demonstrate?
- How did they make physical adjustments in their postures, movements, walks, etc. to portray different characters and circumstances?
- Was there a component of the performance that intrigued you and that you would like to learn? Describe.

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SCIENCE:

Explore the concept of gravity using an imaginary ball. In a circle, toss a volleyball around until everyone has had a turn catching and throwing it. Put the volleyball away and then ask the class to visualize an imaginary volleyball suspended in the air before them. Use the following directions to narrate miming a ball.

Explore the shape of the ball. How large is it?

Feel the texture of the ball. Is it rough or smooth?

Feel the weight of the ball. Make it light.

Make the ball heavy - so heavy you can barely lift it above your head.

Put that ball down. Pick up another ball you can hold in one hand.

Toss the ball in the air. Follow the ascent and descent of the ball with your eyes and head.

Emphasize the catch so that we can "see" the weight of the ball by the way it affects your hand.

Toss the ball to another person.

Roll the ball to another person.

Experiment with different kinds of balls: billiard balls, balloons, beach balls, marbles, footballs, balls that are wet, sticky, hot, fragile, etc.

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

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- This exercise isolates the eyes as the focus for communication. Ask students to imagine they are watching the following using only their eyes to convey each idea:
 - a tennis match
 - an airplane flying high in the sky
 - a good friend coming to greet you
- ❖ Ask students to create the following activities using pantomime:
 - Go fishing.
 - Play basketball.
 - Deal cards.
 - Walk a dog.
 - Go roller skating.
 - Make your bed.
 - Brush your teeth.
- ❖ Nonverbal communication conveys a message about an action, object, or emotion, without the use of words. Use gestures, facial expressions and bodily movement to convey the following:

Help!	Surprise!
I'm cold.	I'm sad.
I'm tired.	I'm happy.
Ouch!	I'm scared ...

- ⇒ Describe and illustrate gestures and bodily movements that are universal to people who work in the following professions:

doctor	photographer
musician	magician
hairdresser	cook
gardener	librarian



SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Staub, Cindie and Matthew. *Mime Basics for Beginners*. Plays, Inc., Boston, MA: 1984.

Montanaro, Tony. *Mime Spoken Here*. Tilbury House. New York: NY, 1995.

American Mime Theatre: www.americanmime.org