

# THE CHAMELEONS

## *Adventures in Space*

**Art Form:** Theatre  
**Style:** Contemporary  
**Culture:** American

### MEET THE ARTIST:

When **The Chameleons**, *Keith Berger* and *Sharon Diskin*, were children, they didn't dream of being mimes when they grew up! Both were drawn to the theatre, studied acting, and appeared in dramatic productions. As teenagers, each attended a mime concert by world-famous artist Marcel Marceau. Marceau's ability to create characters without words had tremendous impact on 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 under the direction of Keith Berger. In 1985, Berger & Diskin began working as a team and have since toured throughout North America and Europe. Their performance style is characterized by strong emotions and natural characters involved in real-life dramas. The Chameleons, masters of traditional mime illusions, are acclaimed for their original mime repertoire. Artistic collaborators as well as husband and wife, their performances demonstrate for us that silence, indeed, is golden.

### ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

*Adventures in Space* is a narrated mime drama in which Berger & Diskin portray two school-aged characters who set off on an exploration of the galaxies. The solar system and its wonders provide the setting as they journey through outer space, encountering situations that provide both fun and foibles. The program, a result of Berger & Diskin's interest in using theatre as a tool to teach the science framework, is both informative and playful. The fantasy uses classic mime illusions and pantomime techniques to address such topics as stars, planets and the force of gravity. *Adventures in Space* explores humanity's natural curiosity and wide-eyed fascination with unknown realms in ways that are poetic, humorous, educational and entertaining.



### PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Mime, one of the earliest forms for self-expression, was probably first used by ancient cultures to express their religions, symbols, myths, traditions, adventures and cycles. In the East, mimed action was part of organized theatre and integral to the national theatres of Japan and China since their beginnings. In the West, mime was its own art form. Greek mime was farcical in nature and performed during fall and spring theatre festivals. Roman mime evolved into exaggerated, often obscene silent shows that were extremely popular.

During the Middle Ages, mime was performed by the traveling jester, who was the probable forerunner of today's comic mime performer. Mime was also presented in more subtle form in church dramas. The Renaissance brought a re-birth of mime as a significant dramatic form that was an important part of Italy's traveling Commedia dell'Arte. By 1800, mime was popular in many countries as dramatic entertainment. It was incorporated into the performances of the Noh theatre of Japan, and the melodramas of France and America.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the French transformed the art form. Jean-Gaspard Debureau took what had once been crude and slapstick and turned mime into real theatre by creating stories with realistic scenes, fully developed characters, and plots about everyday life. His son began the formal teaching of mime as a systemized technique. After World War I, Etienne Decroux, a student of traditional mime, created a modern system of mime technique with theories, exercises, and specific illusions. His student, Marcel Marceau, inspired an international enthusiasm for the art form with a style based on exacting physical technique, simple, cleanly drawn movements, and the lovable 'Everyman' character, Mr. Bip.

In 1952, Paul J. Curtis founded The American Mime Theatre in New York City. American mime, noted for its strong percussive physicality and its naturalistic playing, represents an exciting alternative to the traditional schools of mime.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What character or segment of *Adventures in Space* did you find most memorable? Why?
- How did Keith and Sharon make physical adjustments in their postures or movements to convey the force of gravity?
- Discuss some of the experiences that these characters encountered. What did their experiences tell you about the stars or the planets? What types of challenges did they face?
- What kinds of feelings did you have as you watched the performance? What did it tell you about human curiosity or our fascination with unknown realms?
- Would you want to explore our solar system? What aspects of that experience appeal to you? Describe them.

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SCIENCE/HISTORY:

For years, the Babylonians observed the night sky and recorded celestial patterns. They, the Greeks, and the Romans after them, studied and named the brightest objects in the skies after their gods. Today we call these planets by their Roman names, and our understanding of them is aided by these ancient cultures' observations and knowledge. Venus, the brightest planet, was named for the goddess of beauty. Mars, the blood red planet, was named after the god of war. Mercury, 'messenger of the gods,' is the fastest moving planet. Saturn, the slowest moving, was named for the god of agriculture. Jupiter, named for the chief god, shines all night long. Uranus was named for the sky god who was Saturn's father. Neptune, sea green in color, was named for the sea god. And Pluto, farthest from the light of the Sun, was named after the god of the underworld.

Divide your class into small groups with each selecting one planet to research. As a group, find ways to communicate scientific information about your planet using mime. Allow students time to research and rehearse their presentation and then show them to the class.



Legend:

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

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⊗ Mime is nonverbal communication which conveys a message about an action, object or emotion, without the use of words. Have students use gestures, facial expressions, body movement and sensory recall to 'say' the following: Yes - No - Help! - I'm cold. I'm lost. - I don't feel well. - My foot's asleep. Surprise! - I'm happy. - I'm sorry.
- ⇒ Every object in the universe is pulled to every other object by the force of attraction which is called gravity. On earth, all things have weight, which is the downward force of gravity pulling an object toward the earth's center. Pretend that you are floating in space. Imagine what weightlessness might feel like. Practice moving and walking. Choose a task to pantomime while in a weightless state. How would you adjust your activities like brushing teeth, or pouring a glass of milk to an outer space environment?
- ❖ Earth has a natural satellite circling it called the Moon. Humans have been pondering our moon since the beginning of time; it has long been the source of inspiration for poets and writers. Share examples of poems, stories or songs about the moon. Then have students write and illustrate their own moon poems, stories, songs, rhymes or dreams.
- ▶ Ancient people looked on the night sky with wonder and mystery. To explain the phenomena they observed, they created myths and legends about how stars came to be or why the moon had phases. The Native Americans of North America, the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Chinese all have stories and philosophies explaining the stars or the beginning of the universe. Have your students read a selection of myths and legends about the beginning of the universe from various sources. Ask students to present their favorites and discuss their differences or similarities.



## SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- Gallant, Roy A. *The Planets: Exploring the Solar System*. Four Winds Press. New York: NY, 1982.
- Montanaro, Tony. *Mime Spoken Here*. Tilbury House. New York: NY, 1995.
- American Mime Theatre: [www.americanmime.org](http://www.americanmime.org)