

THE CHAMELEONS

The Wonder of Words

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:

"Words abound, words all around, everywhere a verb, adjective or noun!" *The Wonder of Words* is a mime mystery about words. The Chameleons' captivating solo performance combines the magical actions of mime with the wonder of words to tell a story about a box of nouns mysteriously missing from the famous Wordheimer Library. Nimbus the Mime finds clues among the verbs and adjectives and, assisted by the audience, puts the clues together to solve the mystery. *The Wonder of Words* is designed to create a strong association between actions and words. Three basic parts of speech - nouns, verbs and adjectives - are dramatized and referred to throughout the presentation so that their basic usage and functions become clear, even to the youngest children in the audience.



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 part of *The Wonder of Words* did you find most memorable? Why?
- What mime illusions did the performer use to tell the stories?
- How did the mime adjust his posture or movements to indicate the discovery of a clue? What did the mime do to indicate that he wanted assistance from the audience?
- What kinds of feelings or thoughts did you have as you watched the performance? Did you know what happened to the box of nouns or were you surprised?
- What do you think 'the wonder of words' means? Did you need words to understand the story?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

A mystery is a story that draws upon the detective's or mystery solver's brainpower, keen observation, intelligent guesswork, and ability to imagine and understand motives. *The Wonder of Words* is a mystery that can be used as a model for this writing exercise. Mysteries almost always involve a loss of some kind, a search for and discovery of clues, witnesses, motives, and of course, a criminal.

Ask students to imagine a room in their home in very specific detail. What are the colors in the room? What kind of furniture, fabric, lighting, and objects are in that room? Are there pictures on the wall? Or windows? Next, imagine walking into this room and discovering that something isn't right. Look around, and realize that something very important is missing. What is it? What does the object mean to you?

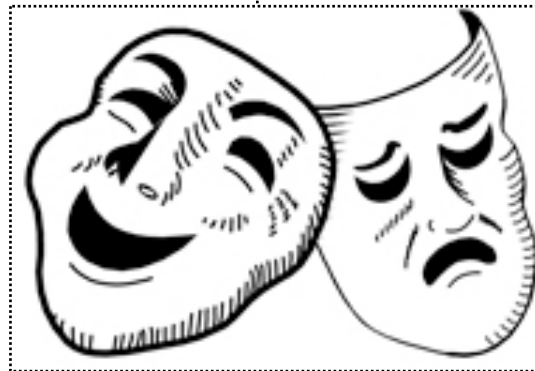
Invent the character who stole the object. Describe the character's appearance and personality. What was their motive for stealing the object? Make up clues and a possible witness. Have students write the story of how they discovered the criminal. After the class has completed writing their stories, divide them into small groups to rehearse and perform their mysteries as mime theatre.

Legend:

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

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⊗ In *The Wonder of Words*, nouns and verbs are pantomimed. Have students practice their pantomime skills by exploring various nouns and verbs. On index cards, write a short pantomime scene. Have students choose a card and then create a short pantomime scene. Some suggestions are: Get dressed. Tie your shoes. Make your bed. Fly a kite. Blow some bubbles.
- ⇒ Have students imagine they are robots with no feelings or emotions. Their movement is stiff and limited to arms and legs moving at right angles and their eyes looking straight ahead. They can speak only in robot-like monotones. Next, have students slowly become human. They can move freely. They can turn their heads or wave their arms. They have feelings and can laugh or speak. Use their creative movement to generate writing in which students describe the differences in movement and expression and what they liked best about being a robot and a human.
- ❖ Creative writing comes both from the 'real world' and the imagination. Have students write a short paragraph about 'The Most Amazing Thing I've Never Seen.' They can write anything as fantastic or unlikely as their imaginations will allow. Then re-orient the assignment by removing the letter 'N,' so they write about 'The Most Amazing Thing I've Ever Seen.' It must be something incredible, but real. Suggest they consider the everyday miracles we take for granted, the beauty found in nature, or the sight of a smile spreading across a loved one's face.



- ⊗ Have your students practice creative movement which involves their whole body. Guide them on a journey of the imagination by narrating an experience they can physically create. Begin by asking them to walk to the following words: backward, forward, on their toes, on their heels, sad, happy, sneaky, afraid. Next, have students walk over different surfaces - slush, hot sand, ice, a sticky floor, mud. Ask them to consider how their bodies express the different circumstances.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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