Teacher Resource – The Peasant Prince 2016

Production notes
The Peasant Prince is a new stage adaptation of the book by Li Cunxin, illustrated by Anne Spudvilas. The play is adapted by Eva Di Cesare, Sandie Eldridge and Tim McGarry for Monkey Baa Theatre Company. The production will premiere on April 9 2016, at the Lendlease Darling Quarter Theatre.

Director Tim McGarry
Production Designer Michael Hankin
Lighting Designer Sian James-Holland
Composer & Sound Designer Daryll Wallis
Movement Director Danielle Micich
Dramaturge Camilla Ah Kin
Stage Manager Kelly Ukena
Technical Manager Russell Stewart
Production Assistant Damion Hollings

At the time of compiling these notes, the cast was not yet confirmed.

STORY TELLING ON THE STAGE
Monkey Baa’s production of The Peasant Prince uses a variety of theatrical techniques to tell the story of Mao’s last dancer, Li Cunxin. Some of these techniques may need to be discussed with students prior to seeing the production.

The Peasant Prince incorporates:
Physical action to advance the story: sections of the story are told without words. It would be a great classroom activity to have the students choose pages from the book to depict through movement, without speaking.
Shifts in place and time: the action moves very rapidly from one place to another, and from one time to another. This is sometimes depicted only with a change in the accent the actor is using, a shift in lighting on the stage, or sound effects that indicate place. The play begins with Li Cunxin as an adult on the stage, shifts back to tell of his boyhood, then finishes back on the stage again: the story’s structure comes full circle.
Actors playing multiple characters: a swift change of character will happen with something as simple as the actor putting on a hat, or changing their scarf, or donning a different jacket, for example. Students can expect to see three of the four actors playing multiple characters – however, the actor playing Li Cunxin only plays Li, he does not double as other roles. Li’s character does change in age throughout the play, from a young boy to an adult.
Production designer Michael Hankin has cited: the practical needs of the production (for example, the show goes on an extensive Australian tour to 38 venues, so needs to be transportable and flexible); the timber typical to ballet studios; and the rice paper backdrop (which may end up being used for shadow puppetry) as three examples of design elements and inspirations for this set design.

The image to the left depicts model figurines peopling the set design. A lamp gives an impression of how lighting and shadow can be used.
Production design: the costumes

Costume renderings for The Peasant Prince. © Michael Hankin 2016

Michael Hankin’s costumes need to be able to be changed very quickly as the actors transform from one character to another in a matter of seconds.

Note the colour scheme the designer has chosen for the costumes. What does this reflect and represent? Have a go at creating your own costume renderings (drawings) for this story, or for another story. You will need good quality paper and a variety of art materials. Consider what aspects of the character you want to capture, and what their dress will say to an audience about their status, personality and qualities.
Spelling and vocabulary

Words from the play *The Peasant Prince*:

- Academy
- Ballet
- Beijing
- Bewildering
- Bound feet
- Bow shooter
- Commune
- Consul
- Dignity
- Fate
- Humility
- Jetes
- Kang
- Mandarin
- Pheasant
- Pirouettes
- Pride
- Revolutionary guard
- Self-criticisms
- Starvation
- Teeming
- The Nutcracker ballet
- Tolerate
- Wind box

People and places in the play:

- Chairman Mao
- Clare Duncan, President of The Houston Ballet.
- Communist Party
- Consul Zhang
- Dia
- Director Wang
- Fourth Uncle & Fourth Aunty
- Houston
- Lei Feng
- Li’s Brothers’ Names: Cuncia, Cunyuan, Cunmao, Cunsang, Cunfar, Cunxin, Jing Tring
- Madam Mao
- Niang
- Qingdao
- Shandong Provence
- Teacher Gao
- Teacher Song
- Teacher Xiao
Activities for younger students (Stages 1 and 2)

AIMS:
- To experience the joy of creative expression and drama play
- To explore themes and ideas of *The Peasant Prince* in greater depth

LEARNING OUTCOMES
- An experiential understanding of ideas within the story
- Collaboration skills from group drama
- Time for reflection and discussion of the story, themes and ideas
- Greater empathy and understanding for a story from another country and time
- Preparedness for attending the theatre production
- Artistic expression, creative play and group team-building

FATE
“**You have your secret dreams. Make them come true**”
Li Cunxin becomes one of the greatest ballet dancers in the world.

What is your greatest ambition? How would it feel for this to come true?
Create a frozen picture of this feeling of your dream coming true. Then, contemplate and discuss what you think it might require for you to realise this dream.

“**Ours is a hopeless fate**”
The seven Li sons and their parents all sleep in the one bed, the walls are covered with newspapers. There is never enough food. There are no toys to play with.

Create short scenes acting out a day in the life of the Li family, perhaps working in small groups to create a performance piece. Use mime to explore what it is like to experience the Li family’s extreme poverty. Start at the beginning of the day, and move through each different stage of a day in the life of the Li family. Include a sequence of movement depicting the family preparing, serving and eating a meal. Compare and contrast this with your own family meal times.

STORIES FROM OTHER CULTURES
This is an adaptation of the story of *The Frog and the Well*, as appears in The Peasant Prince:

Once upon a time, there was a frog that lived in a deep dark well. It was the only home he knew. One day he met a frog that lived in the world above. ‘Come down and play with me,’ it said. ‘My world up here is much bigger!’ replied the frog. So the frog in the well went and told his father what he’d heard.

‘My Son’, his father said, ‘I’ve heard there is a bigger and better world up there. But your destiny is down here in the well. There is no way you can get out.’ ‘I can, I can get out of here. Let me show you!’ said the son. ‘It’s no use, my son. Forget the world above. Be satisfied with what you have.’ ‘I want to get out Father, I want to see the big world above!’ ‘No, my son. Accept fate. Learn to live with what is given.’

Find a way of portraying this story, through movement, song, poetry, art or another form of creative expression.
What is the message of this story?
Find other stories from Chinese culture.
Draw costume designs for the characters in this story.
Illustrate this story as a picture book.
MY SCHOOL AND LI’S SCHOOL

Below is an extract from a scene in Li’s classroom at school.

SCENE TWO – In the School Classroom

The students march into class and they chant in English and wave the Little Red Book.

Students Long live Chairman Mao! I love Chairman Mao!
Long live Chairman Mao! I love Chairman Mao!
Long live Chairman Mao! I love Chairman Mao!

Teacher Song steps forward
Teacher Good Morning Students.
Students Good Morning Teacher Song.
Teacher We wish Chairman Mao a long long life because our great leader saved us. He is our saviour, our sun, our moon. Children like you couldn’t even dream of sitting here in the classroom but our beloved Chairman Mao has made it possible for everyone in China to have this privilege.
Students Long Live Chairman Mao! I love Chairman Mao!
Teacher Have your parents told you about the cruel life they lived under Chiang Kaishek’s regime?
Students Yes, Teacher Song!
Teacher And who did the Government care for?
Students The filthy landlords, Teacher Song!
Teacher They were cold dark days indeed.
Students Yes, Teacher Song!
Teacher Students, today we are going to honour the inspiring stories of Lei Feng the faithful and humble soldier of our beloved Chairman Mao.

The students cheer excitedly.

Teacher Quiet. Students, what are our beloved Chairman Mao’s three ‘goods’?
All Students Good Study! Good work! Good health!

School bell rings
© The Peasant Prince adaptation by Eva Di Cesare, Sandie Eldridge and Tim McGarry

Take turns in playing different roles, and staging the scene using props and furniture. Discuss the differences between this scene in Li’s class, and your own class routines. Write a scene of what lessons are like in your own class, and compare the two scenes.
Activities for older students (Stages 2 and 3)

AIMS:
• To experience the joy of creative expression and drama play
• To explore themes and ideas of The Peasant Prince in depth

LEARNING OUTCOMES
• An experiential understanding of ideas within the story
• Collaboration skills from group drama
• Reflection on and discussion of the story, themes and ideas
• Greater empathy and understanding for this story, which is from another country and time
• Preparedness for attending the theatre production
• Artistic expression, creative play and group team-building
• Improved literacy and language skills

PROPAGANDA
Below is an extract from a scene in Li’s classroom at school.

SCENE TWO – In the School Classroom
The students march into class and they chant in English and wave the Little Red Book.

Students Long live Chairman Mao! I love Chairman Mao!
          Long live Chairman Mao! I love Chairman Mao!
          Long live Chairman Mao! I love Chairman Mao!

Teacher Song steps forward
Teacher Good Morning Students.
Students Good Morning Teacher Song.
Teacher We wish Chairman Mao a long long life because our great leader saved us. He is our saviour, our sun, our moon.
Children like you couldn’t even dream of sitting here in the classroom but our beloved Chairman Mao has made it possible for everyone in China to have this privilege.

Students Long Live Chairman Mao! I love Chairman Mao!

Using the above text as a starting point, research and discuss the Mao regime’s use of propaganda. Discuss propaganda more generally – what is it for, and what are its features?

In small groups, work together to create a piece of propaganda. This could be in the form of a written announcement; a poster featuring text and image; a performed advertisement made for Television. Choose what you are going to be promoting with your propaganda.

Share these propaganda projects with the class and measure the impact of their persuasiveness.
FATE
“You have your secret dreams. Make them come true”
Li Cunxin becomes one of the greatest ballet dancers in the world.

What is your greatest ambition? How would it feel for this to come true?
Create a frozen picture of this feeling of your dream coming true. Then, contemplate and discuss what you think it might require for you to realise this dream.

“Ours is a hopeless fate”
The seven Li sons and their parents all sleep in the one bed, the walls are covered with newspapers. There is never enough food. There are no toys to play with.
Create short scenes acting out a day in the life of the Li family, perhaps working in small groups to create a performance piece. Use mime to explore what it is like to experience the Li family’s extreme poverty. Start at the beginning of the day, and move through each different stage of a day in the life of the Li family. Include a sequence of movement depicting the family preparing, serving and eating a meal. Compare and contrast this with your own family meal times.

STATUS
In The Peasant Prince, there are characters that have a great deal of power and agency, and others who do not.

These activities explore the status of different characters in the story: divide into pairs and take turns to be a PEASANT and a PRINCE. Experience what it is like to relate to one another as you move about the classroom space. Note the effect of your status on body language, pace of movement and your vocal tone. Note too the impact on your attitude to others around you. Swap roles.

Now physicalize all the steps you identify moving up the status scale from peasant to prince: make a list of the steps from one end of the spectrum to the other. After these activities take time to reflect and discuss responses to this exploration.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: MAO’S CHINA AND THE USA
The Peasant Prince traverses Chinese, or Eastern, culture, and American (or Western) culture.

As a class, consider what constitutes ‘culture’: shared expectations, rituals, symbols, and so on. Consider how culture is expressed through our attitudes, body language, gestures and non-verbal communication.

Discuss instances in The Peasant Prince when people from different cultures relate to one another.

Why is there cultural tension between America and China, as depicted in The Peasant Prince?
FORUM THEATRE

Forum theatre is a technique you can use while acting out a scene. The audience is encouraged to STOP the action (by calling out “stop”) and suggesting a different action. At other times, the actors themselves can stop the action, and ask for help. Sometimes someone else can step in and take over a role - or even introduce a new role.

This technique allows the audience and the actors to work together to find alternative actions that can change the course of a story, and therefore change the outcome for a character. The audience become active storytellers in this process, and can shape the journey of an oppressed (or lower status) character in the story.

Select scenes from *The Peasant Prince* and develop a short script to stage this scene. Perform the scene for the rest of the class. Repeat the performance, and this time have people in the audience call STOP during the action and suggest alternative courses of action. Replay this moment of the scene incorporating this newly suggested alternative, improvising the rest of the scene a discovering how this suggestion changes the outcome of the scene – how it changes the characters’ destiny. Discuss the scenes as a class. This technique is particularly effective when used in scenes when the character faces a major challenge or dilemma.

There are many Forum Theatre references on the internet, including the following sites:

http://dramaresource.com/drama-strategies/forum-theatre/

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/drama/exploring/explorative_strategiesrev7.shtml

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