



dance music theater

Performances

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

SchoolTime 06/07



Study Guide

Peking Acrobats

Monday, January 22, 2007 at 11:00 a.m.

Zellerbach Hall



About Cal Performances and *SchoolTime*

The mission of Cal Performances is to inspire, nurture and sustain a lifelong appreciation for the performing arts. Cal Performances, the performing arts presenter of the University of California, Berkeley, fulfills this mission by presenting, producing and commissioning outstanding artists, both renowned and emerging, to serve the University and the broader public through performances and education and community programs. In 2005/06 Cal Performances celebrated 100 years on the UC Berkeley Campus.

Our *SchoolTime* program cultivates an early appreciation for and understanding of the performing arts amongst our youngest audiences, with hour-long, daytime performances by the same world-class artists who perform as part of the main season. Teachers have come to rely on *SchoolTime* as an integral and important part of the academic year.



Sponsors of Cal Performances Education and Community Programs

Cal Performances' Education and Community Programs are supported by Berkeley Community Fund, California Arts Council, California Savings Bank, Citigroup Foundation, City of Berkeley Civic Arts Program, East Bay Community Foundation, Robert J. and Helen H. Glaser Family Foundation, Walter & Elise Haas Fund, McKesson Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, The San Francisco Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, Western States Arts Federation, and The Zellerbach Family Foundation.

Welcome



January 3, 2007

Dear Educators and Students,

Welcome to *SchoolTime*! On Monday, January 22, 2007, at 11:00 a.m., you will attend the *SchoolTime* performance of Peking Acrobats at Zellerbach Hall on the UC Berkeley campus.

Hailing from the People's Republic of China, the gymnasts, jugglers, cyclists and tumblers of the Peking Acrobats have been diplomats of their spirited culture for decades. Since 1952, they have enchanted audiences worldwide with the artistry, dexterity and skill of their ancient folk art, acrobatics. The 26 member troupe is the largest of its kind, performing under the direction and choreography of Hai Ken Tsai, whose family goes back three generations in Chinese acrobatics. With the live accompaniment of a traditional Chinese orchestra, the acrobats transform 2000-year-old acts of agility and grace into a modern day vision of entertainment and wonder.

This study guide will prepare your students for their field trip to Zellerbach Hall. Your students can actively participate at the performance by:

- OBSERVING how the performers use their bodies.
- MARVELING at the skill demonstrated by the performers.
- THINKING ABOUT all the practice that goes into each act.
- REFLECTING on the sounds, sights, and performance skills on display at the theater.

We look forward to seeing you at *SchoolTime*!

Sincerely,

Rica Anderson
Education Programs Administrator

Table of Contents



1. Theater Etiquette	1
2. About the Performance	2
3. About the Artists	3
4. About the Art Form	4
5. History of Chinese Acrobats	8
6. Learning Activities	11
7. Glossary	14
8. California State Standards	15



1 Theater Etiquette

Be prepared and arrive early. Ideally you should arrive at the theater 30 to 45 minutes before the show. Allow for travel time and parking, and plan to be in your seats at least 15 minutes before the performance begins.

Be aware and remain quiet. The theater is a “live” space—you can hear the performers easily, but they can also hear you, and you can hear other audience members, too! Even the smallest sounds, like rustling papers and whispering, can be heard throughout the theater, so it’s best to stay quiet so that everyone can enjoy the performance without distractions. The international sign for “Quiet Please” is to silently raise your index finger to your lips.

Show appreciation by applauding. Applause is the best way to show your enthusiasm and appreciation. Performers return their appreciation for your attention by bowing to the audience at the end of the show. It is always appropriate to applaud at the end of a performance, and it is customary to continue clapping until the curtain comes down or the house lights come up.

Participate by responding to the action onstage. Sometimes during a performance, you may respond by laughing, crying or sighing. By all means, feel free to do so! Appreciation can be shown in many different ways, depending upon the art form. For instance, an audience attending a string quartet performance will sit very quietly, while the audience at a gospel concert may be inspired to participate by clapping and shouting.

Concentrate to help the performers. These artists use concentration to focus their energy while on stage. If the audience is focused while watching the performance, they feel supported and are able to do their best work. They can feel that you are with them!

Please note: *Backpacks and lunches are not permitted in the theater. Bags will be provided for lobby storage in the event that you bring these with you. There is absolutely no food or drink permitted in the seating areas. Recording devices of any kind, including cameras, cannot be used during performances. Please remember to turn off your cell phone.*



2

About the Performance

Guiding Questions:

- ◆ How are the Peking Acrobats different from other acrobats you've seen?
- ◆ What is an acrobat's training like?
- ◆ What kinds of shapes, images and movements do the acrobats make with their bodies onstage?

Trained in the rigorous art of Chinese acrobatics since early youth, the Peking Acrobats have garnered international acclaim. The *SchoolTime* performance will feature the company's theatrically staged acts of astounding acrobatics and Chinese traditional dance.

Contortionists, tumblers and jugglers will spin plates, create a bicycle pagoda and juggle everything from balls to umbrellas using not only hands but feet.

Perching atop a 30 foot tower of chairs, the acrobats will bend like rubber and balance human pyramids while simultaneously riding moving bicycles.

Please see page 4 in "About the Art Form" for a list of acrobatic feats that may be included in this performance.

"The Peking Acrobats regularly passed from the seemingly impossible to the virtually unbelievable" (*Los Angeles Times*).



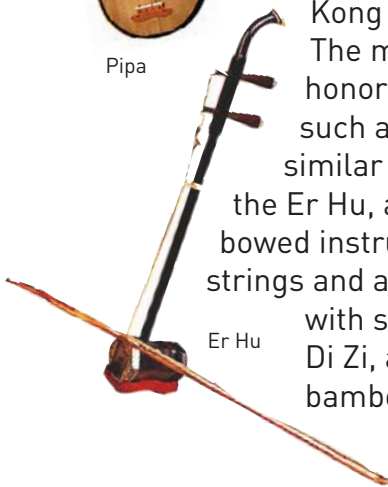
3

About the Artists

The Peking Acrobats are from the People's Republic of China. An offspring of the Great China Circus popular during the 1920s, the Peking Acrobats became a professional acrobatic company in its own right in 1958. The artists of this troupe perform under the direction and choreography of Hai Ken Tsai, a famous performer whose family goes back three generations of Chinese acrobatics.



Pipa



Er Hu

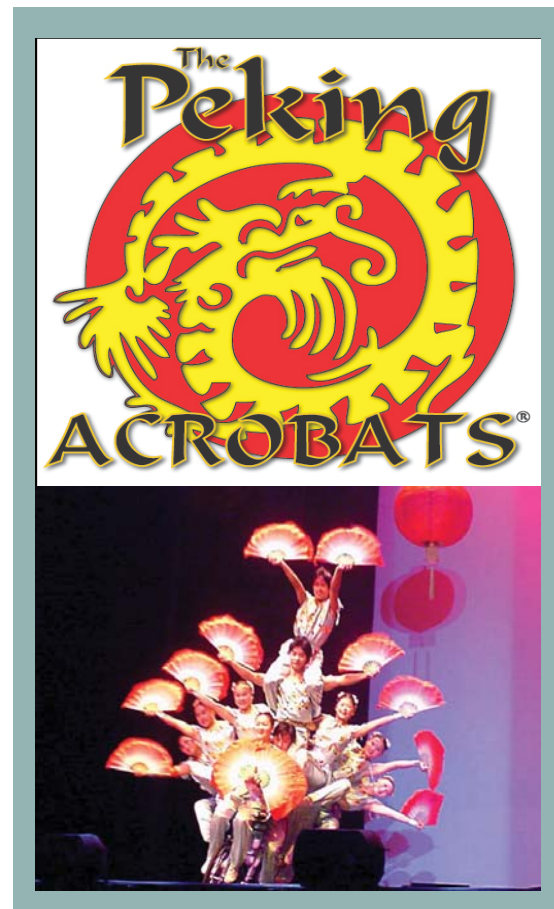
Although Chinese acrobats rarely perform with live music, the Peking Acrobats are accompanied onstage by the musicians of the Hong Kong Chinese Orchestra. The musicians play time-honored instruments such as the Pipa, which is similar to the Western lute, the Er Hu, a distinctive-sounding bowed instrument with two strings and a sound box covered with snake skin, and the Di Zi, a flute made from bamboo or wood.

Among the finest acrobatic artists in China today, members of the Peking Acrobats bring an ancient folk art to life, along with the pageantry and spectacle of a Chinese circus. Redefining notions of balance with each stunt, the Peking Acrobats regularly leave audiences spellbound with their graceful athleticism and touch of comic mischief. Through this performance, you will experience a taste of Chinese culture

and virtuosity. The *Chicago Tribune* reported: "At no time have we seen anything like the Peking Acrobats. Feats of clowning, dexterity, grace, strength and coordination rippled from the stage..."

And the *Seattle Times* said: "Nearly everything the Peking Acrobats did was amazing—and stunning, and breathtaking and WOW!"

Today, the 26-member troupe is the largest of its kind in a country where acrobats are considered artists on par with opera singers. This troupe travels throughout China and the world as ambassadors of their spirited culture.



4

About the Art Form

Guiding Questions:

- ◆ What kinds of props do the acrobats use and how do they use them?
- ◆ How is Chinese culture reflected in the performance?
- ◆ What are the four basic acrobatic skills?

Acrobatic acts have evolved throughout the history of China, a country credited with producing some of the best acrobats in the world. Chinese acrobats maintain a notable style and standard routines. However, there are some similarities between the acrobatic schools of different countries. The four basic skills acrobats learn are handstands, juggling, trapeze, and balancing, and all recognizable circuses have juggling, trapeze, and handstand acts as well as comic relief. Differences are reflected in theatrical presentation, including music, novelty acts such as clowns, and lighting.

Acrobatic Training and Handstands

Most Chinese acrobats are selected to attend special training schools at around six years of age. Students work long and challenging hours to hone their craft. Six days a week they take general education classes in the mornings, then practice gymnastics, juggling, martial arts and dance in the afternoons.



The first two years of acrobatic training are the most important for aspiring acrobats. Acrobatic students work daily on basic skills. The four core foundational skills for Chinese acrobats are handstand, tumbling, flexibility, and dance.

Each student will have greater talent for one of the four core acrobatic skills. Among the four, handstand is the most important as it is considered the essence of Chinese acrobatics. Many signature acrobatic acts include some form of handstand. Master teachers have



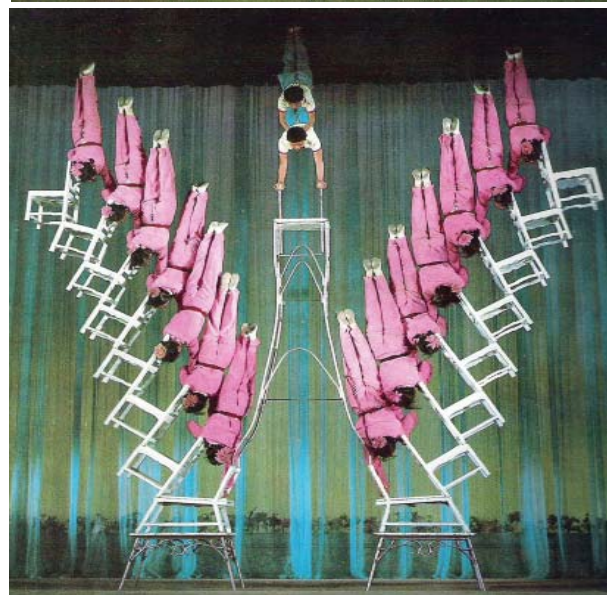


commented that, “handstand training is to acrobats what studying the human body is to a medical student.”

An acrobat goes through progressive steps to learn basic to advanced handstands. Training directly affects three areas of the body, shoulders, lower back, and wrists. A weakness in any one of these areas will compromise one’s ability. In China, the basic handstand is learned by the youngest, beginning students, starting against the wall. In three to six months of full time training, students build up to one half hour of wall handstands. During this time, the three areas of the body become stronger until at last students are able to hold the free handstand.

Holding a still handstand is translated in Chinese as the “Dead handstand.” A good handstand has pleasing form and versatility. A versatile handstand is a position from which the acrobat is able to execute many variations.

The handstand is the most disliked aspect of training for the young students. In a basic handstand, one is upside down with all the body’s weight on the wrist, shoulder and lower back. There is natural pressure to want to come down and, since the hands are the only support for the body, there is absolutely no way to cheat while in a handstand.



After the initial two-year training, only a few acrobats will specialize in the handstand. However, handstand training is essential to all acrobatic work, due to the role it plays in strengthening the body, mind and spirit of the acrobat.

Signature Chinese Acrobatic Acts

Acrobatic acts are performed either solo or in groups. Group acts require team cooperation, trust and constant communication. The disadvantage of a group act is that when one performer becomes incapacitated or decides to leave the group act, it puts the other acrobats at risk in their careers. It often happens that acrobats need to start over again. However, in creating a new act or learning a new specialty, an acrobat doesn't need to spend two years learning the four basic acrobatic skills; tumbling, flexibility, handstand, and dance.

Hoop Diving: This act is over 2,000 years old. Also called "Dashing Through Narrows," it was once known as "Swallow Play" because the performers imitate the flying movements of swallows (birds) as they leap nimbly through narrow rings.

Unicycle bowl flip: In a relatively new feat, an acrobat rides a very tall unicycle on a round table, kicking up bowls, kettles and spoons with perfect ease, and piling them on her head.

Chinese Vase: Acrobats playfully squeeze into tiny brightly colored vases as they perform tricky acrobatics—smiling all the while.

Rolling Balance Contortionist: Performers gracefully bend and twist into unbelievable knots, frequently while balancing precariously perched objects on every limb.

Double Pole: A group of acrobats climb up and down thin poles demonstrating agility and strength to execute a variety of dangerous movements. This act requires a considerable amount of upper body and abdominal strength.

Chinese Diablo: Performed in China for over 100 years, two sticks of bamboo are connected with string to spin an additional piece of wood (like a yo-yo) back and fourth in a variety of timed movements. The Chinese Diablo makes a whistling sound when it spins.



Spinning plates: Performers use numerous long, pencil-thin sticks to support spinning plates that look like lotus leaves facing the wind or colorful butterflies flitting and dancing. This act is often combined with balancing and tumbling, as when a performer spins 12 china plates with both hands while in a headstand on a rubber ball!

Chair stacking handstand: A collective act involving two to seven acrobats and as many or more chairs. While on a pagoda or ladder of chairs, the performers practice handstands and other stunts requiring tremendous arm strength, as well as superior balancing skill.

Bicycle: Acrobats ride together on a single bicycle, take it apart, turn it over a table and display a variety of postures, notably the beautiful tableau of a peacock fanning its feathers.

Foot Juggling: Many different objects can be used in juggling. Jar juggling demonstrates simplicity and steadiness. Originally, peasants used grain containers to perform various feats in celebration of a bumper harvest. Later,

jar tricks were adapted by acrobats and became one of their most popular entertainments. Performers lie on a special seat and juggle or catch objects with their feet. Long ago, in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), jugglers manipulated bottles, plates and jars with their feet. Now performers toss tables, umbrellas, rugs and any number of household items.

Lion and Dragon acts: This act comes from Chinese folk dance developed from Buddhist beliefs. The lion represents the spirit of renewal and is revered for dispelling bad luck. Big Lion is played by two acrobats, while Small Lion is played by one. The lion rolls and jumps, exhibiting attributes such as strength, agility and tranquility. Accompanied by traditional percussion instruments, this act creates a joyful and festive atmosphere.



5

History of Chinese Acrobats

The art of Chinese acrobatics is an ancient tradition. Over its long and rich history, acrobatics has become one of the most popular art forms among the Chinese people. While many historical records provide evidence for the development of Chinese acrobatics as far back as the Xia Dynasty (4,000 years ago), it is most commonly held that the art form did not become wildly popular until approximately 2,500 years ago when it began to capture the attention of the country's powerful emperors.

Acrobatics first developed during the **Warring States Period** (475BC-221BC), evolving from the working lives of its people in Wuqiao (pronounced oo-chow) county, located in Hebei Province.



The mural *An Outing* by the Lady of Song of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) depicts the grand scene of a Peeress's outing. Walking in front of the large procession is an acrobat doing pole balancing with four young boys doing stunts. These figures are vivid, lively and vigorous, and is considered the most complete extant Chinese mural containing images of acrobatics.



It was natural that acrobats first used the things around them—instruments of labor such as tridents, wicker rings and articles of daily use such as tables, chairs, jars, plates and bowls—as performance props, to experiment with balancing and performing other acrobatic tricks. In a time when China was traditionally an agricultural society, where there were no electronic gadgets or telephones, people had time to use their imaginations to learn new skills such as acrobatics. These acts were incorporated into community celebrations, for example, to celebrate a bountiful harvest. This undefined form of entertainment and leisure eventually evolved into a form of performance that became recognizable to the Chinese people.

During the Han Dynasty (221BC-220AD) these rudimentary acts of acrobatics developed into the “Hundred Entertainments.” Many more acts soon developed. Music accompaniment and other theatrical elements were added as interest in the art form grew among the emperors. According to the stone engravings unearthed at Yinan County of Shandong Province in 1954, there were superb acrobatic performances with music accompaniment on the acrobatic stage of 2,000 years ago, including acts that are familiar to this day, such as Pole Climbing, Rope-Walking (the present day Tight-Wire Feats), Fish Turned into Dragon (present day Conjuring) and Five Tables (like the present Balancing on Chairs).

In the Tang Dynasty, known for its extraordinary flourishing of Chinese culture, the number of acrobats greatly increased and their performing skills much improved. The famous poets of that time, Bai Juyi and Yuan Chen, wrote poems on acrobatic performances. In the Dunhuang mural painting “Lady Song Going on a Journey,” there are images of acrobatic and circus performers.

Since these early times, acrobatics have been incorporated into many forms of Chinese performance arts, including dance, opera, *wushu* (martial arts) and sports. Acrobatics have gone beyond the boundaries of performance, serving an important role in the cultural exchange between China and other Western nations including the United States. Today, China presents acrobatics in the international



arena as an example of the rich traditions of Chinese culture and the hard-working nature of the Chinese people.

Family Acrobatic Troupes

Acrobatic troupes were traditionally family-owned, and members made their living roaming the countryside as street performers for their livelihood. Many of the famous acrobatic families in China continued this tradition through many generations. Two famous acrobatic families were the Dung family and the Chen Family. Throughout China, the Dung Family was known for their magic. The Chen Family was famous for their unique style of juggling, with a signature program using as many as eight badminton rackets at one time. Other acrobatic troupes have tried to match the skill level of the Chen family’s juggling feats with little success. It was common practice that family acrobatic troupes would teach only their own children and close relatives the

secrets of their acts in order keep these mysterious techniques within the family last name and carry on traditions.

[Note: This was also the case in European circus families, where circus families were continued through many generations.]

Acrobatics in China after 1949

On October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was formally established, with its national capital at Beijing (known in the West as "Peking"). All the companies and businesses in the nation became the government's property, including the acrobatic troupes. Generally, the Communist government approved of acrobatics as an art of the people, not an elite art form. The people's government made great efforts to foster and develop national arts and acrobatics gained a new life as every province, municipality and autonomous region set up their own acrobatic troupes.

In Communist theory, everyone is provided for and taken care of equally: the term "Iron Rice Bowl" means all eat out of the same rice bowl. For acrobatic troupes, this meant that operational costs for acrobatic troupes were subsidized by the local governments and performers didn't need to worry about meeting annual financial earnings. However, some in China see inconsistencies between Communist theory and practice, as people in powerful government positions appear to receive more financially and have many perks.

In the "new" China, there have been great improvements in the contents and skill of acrobatics. Acrobatic leaders have set up a designing and directing system

aimed at creating graceful stage images, harmonious musical accompaniment and good supporting effects of costumes, props and lighting to turn their performances into a full-fledged stage art. The present Chinese acrobatics is full of optimism, determined to reflect the industry, resourcefulness, courage and undaunted spirit of the Chinese people.

Additionally, recent changes in government structure in China, including more freedom to create and build, have led to dramatic improvements in the working lives of acrobats. Now, they can form their own performing groups, look for show opportunities and perform later into adulthood. Currently, there are over 100 government operated acrobatic troupes and hundreds more family and private troupes performing in China.



Mao Tse-Tong (1893–1976), founder of the People's Republic of China, greets Chinese acrobats

6

Learning Activities

Performance and Culture

Questions for Students:

1. How long has acrobatics been around in China?
2. At what age do acrobats typically begin training in China?
3. What types of props are used in acrobatic routines?
4. Can you name three of the major cities in China?
5. Why do acrobats wear colorful costumes?
6. Name the 4 basic acrobatic skills learned in basic training.
7. Name 5 acrobatic acts created in China.
8. What are the “3 P’s” common to the secrets of learning acrobatics and becoming a good student?

Younger elementary students: Practice, Practice, Practice

Older students and adults: Practice, Perseverance, Patience

9. Name one word to describe acrobatics.
10. Can you remember one major Chinese holiday celebration that always features acrobats?

Visual Arts (Grades K-6)

Discussion and Activity:

Think about the Peking Acrobats performance. Which amazing feat was your favorite? Discuss what you liked best about the show and why. Create an advertisement for a future Peking Acrobats performance. Make sure to incorporate an illustration and words that you think reflect the best part of the show.

Vocabulary Builder (Grades 2-6)

Practice dictionary skills and build vocabulary. Look through the *SchoolTime* study guide and make a list of unfamiliar words. Check the glossary on page 13, and then use a dictionary to look up the meaning of words. Write and share sentences using your newly learned words.

Social Studies (Grades 3-6)

Discussion and Activity:

Brainstorm what you know about China, the Chinese people, and the Chinese Communist government. Write about what it might be like to live in China. How might it be different from the way you live?

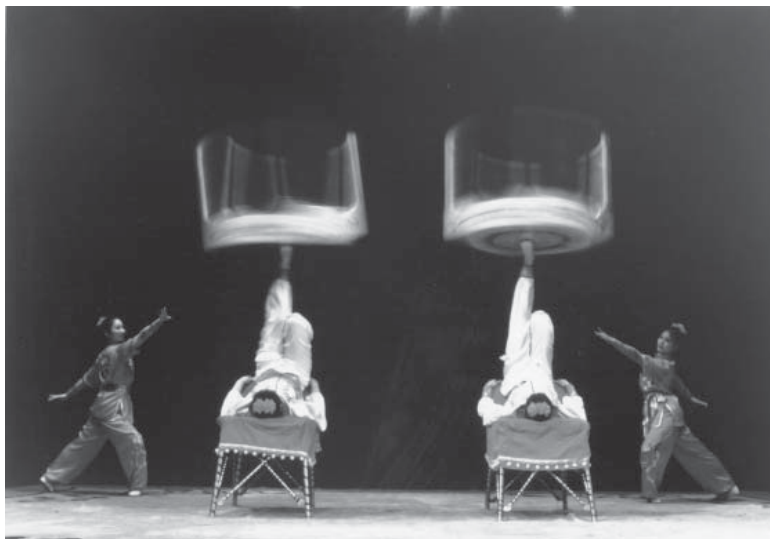
Performing Arts (Grades K-6)

Activity and Reflection (Grades K-6):

Take a large sheet of newspaper, roll it up as tightly as you can and tape it in the middle and at the ends. (Teachers can prepare these.) Place your “newspaper stick” on the palm of your right or left hand and try to keep it balanced and upright. Do this for a few minutes then reflect on what it was like. Talk about what the acrobats’ training must be like for them to develop their skills.

Discussion, Activity and Sharing (Grades 3-6):

According to the Peking Acrobats, some of their acts represent certain emotions and beliefs. Discuss some of the acts and the stage pictures you remember. What do you think the artists were trying to show? If you were to create a frozen stage picture representing one of your own emotions or beliefs, what might it look like? Talk about this in groups of 4 or 5 people, then decide together on a frozen stage picture that is safe and easy for your bodies to create and hold. Have each group share with the class.



Common sayings in acrobatic training schools:

“Seven minutes on stage is equal to seven years of training.”

“Must be able to enduring suffering to become a good acrobat.”

“Not too fast, not too slow: need patience and middle road to find success in your acrobatic skills.”

Mandarin Basics

1. How are you?
Ni3 hao3 ma5?

你好吗?

2. Hello
Ni3 hao3

你好!

3. Thank you
Xie4xie4

谢谢

4. I like your show
Wo3 xi3huan1 zhe4 chang3 xi4

我喜欢这场戏

5. Very great!
Tai4 hao3 le5

太好了

Info on tones can be found here:
<http://www.pinyin.org/pinyinTones.cfm>

References

Books:

The Best of Chinese Acrobatics by Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, China.

Websites:

www.iaipresentations.com

www.redpanda2000.com

www.CirqueduSoleil.com

www.ringling.com

7

Glossary

acrobat: a skilled performer of gymnastic feats, as walking on a tightrope or swinging on a trapeze

agility: the ability to move quickly and easily

ambassador: a representative of a specific country or culture

autonomous: self-governing, independent, subject to its own laws only

choreographer: a person who creates dance compositions and plans and arranges patterns of movements for dances

conjure: to produce or effect something as if by magic

contortionists: a flexible performer able to move muscles, limbs and joints into unusual positions.

evolve: to change and develop gradually

garner: to get, acquire, earn

gymnast: a person highly trained to display strength, balance and agility

jubilant: showing great joy, satisfaction, or triumph

leisure: time free from the demands of work or duty, when one can rest, enjoy hobbies or sports

novelty: state or quality of being novel, new, or unique; newness

renewal: to restore or replenish, restart

revered: to regard with awe, admiration, and devotion

rudimentary: most basic and simple

signature: any unique, distinguishing aspect, feature, or mark

subsidize: to assist or aid with a grant or contribution of money

troupe: a company, band, or group of singers, actors, or other performers that travels about together

versatile: having or capable of many uses

virtuosity: the skill of a person with a special knowledge or ability



8

California State Standards

Theater:

3.0 Historical and Cultural Context: Students analyze the role of development of theater, film/video, and electronic media in the past and present cultures throughout the world. Noting diversity as it relates to the theater.

K.3.1 Retell or dramatize stories, myths, fables, and fairy tales for various cultures and times.

4.3.1 Identify theatrical or storytelling traditions in the cultures of ethnic groups throughout the history of California.

5.0 Connections, Relationships, and Applications: Students apply what they learn in theater, film/video, and electronic media across subject areas. They develop competencies and creative skills in problem solving, communication, and time management that contribute to lifelong learning and career skills. They also learn about careers in and related to theater.

Physical Education:

Standard 1: Students demonstrate the motor skills and movement patterns needed to perform a variety of physical activities.

K.1.6 Balance on one, two, three, four, and five body parts.

1.1.6 Balance oneself, demonstrating momentary stillness, in symmetrical and asymmetrical shapes using body parts other than both feet as a base of support.

5.1.1 Perform simple small-group balance stunts by distributing weight and base of support.

6.1.11 Design and perform smooth, flowing sequences of stunts, tumbling, and rhythmic patterns that combine traveling, rolling, balancing, and transferring weight.

Standard 2: Students demonstrate knowledge of movement concepts, principles, and strategies that apply to the learning and performance of physical activities.

4.2.10 Design a routine to music that includes even and uneven locomotor patterns.

4.3.1 Participate in appropriate warm-up and cool-down exercises for particular physical activities.

Standard 3: Students assess and maintain a level of physical fitness to improve health and performance.

1.3.6 Stretch arms, shoulders, back and legs without hyperflexing or hyperextending the joints.

2.3.1 Demonstrate the proper form for stretching the hamstrings, quadriceps, shoulders, biceps, and triceps.

Standard 4: Students demonstrate knowledge of physical fitness concepts, principles, and strategies to improve health and performance.

4.4.4 Identify healthful choices for meals and snacks that help improve physical performance.

Standard 5: Students demonstrate and utilize knowledge of psychological and sociological concepts, principles, and strategies that apply to the learning and performance of physical activity.

3.5.1 Set a personal goal to improve a motor skill and work toward that goal in non-school time.

3.5.3 List the benefits of following and the risks of not following safety procedures and rules associated with physical activity.



This Cal Performances *SchoolTime* Study Guide was written, edited and designed by Laura Abrams, Rica Anderson, Nicole Anthony and Wayne Huey.
Copyright © 2007 Cal Performances