

ISLAND OF THE BLUE DOLPHIN

Study Guide Addition /Acting/Theatre Activities

by Donna Inglima

Theatre & Acting activities can be used to explore how a story makes its meaning. The books we work with are rich examples of character, survival, history, and culture. Here are some simple exercises that give the students a more “hands-on” and/or “hands-in” experience either before or after our school visit.

The following are, of course, suggestions only. Alter them as you choose. It is no surprise to you that theatre, dance, visual arts, and music create more engaged students, even for second language speakers. Seeing a story come alive with actors and movement helps all students to take the next step into a deeper understanding of words, analysis, circumstances, history, communication, and the human condition.

Each exercise is designed to engage the whole class even though they are broken down into smaller groups. With the exception of exploring mask making and character work, each exercise can be approached in a short study session. Have fun.

In our production we use puppets, masks, stuffed animals, movement, and music to help tell the story. Using these theatrical devices frees the actor from a traditional “reality” and allows the storytelling to move into the world of suggestion, abstraction, and imagination. For the student audience, an opportunity to explore these storytelling techniques can open new forms of expression vocally and physically. By the student experiencing being the storyteller, it allows for deeper involvement in the structure of the story as well as an ownership of the content.

1. Have the students identify the various props we used and describe how we used them.

The actors are able to make the simple props come to life by using their voices to make sounds and their bodies to move and in some cases manipulate the prop. This is true in the case of the Sea Elephants, the birds, the dolphins (wood cut outs). Our Ramo puppet is a “special” prop that was made specifically for the production. The same is true for the Octopus and Rontu.

Activity: 40 minutes – 3 Days, 2 students at a time.

Bring into class or have the students bring to class some stuffed animals to “animate”. You can recreate a chapter of the story using your own animals. You could have the students, while using the animals, tell parts of the story from the eyes of the stuffed animal.

2. Masks are used to delineate various characters in the play. Our masks are made of screening material and paint. The use of Masks is an ancient traditional theatrical method that began with the Greeks. It allows a few actors to play many roles. It also releases the “actor” from himself or herself in the same way a puppet or animated object does. The student “actor” can “become” the mask character and often experience freedom vocally and physically.

Activity: 2 Hours (1hr each day) – Whole Class

Bring in a variety of colored construction paper, sturdy paper plates, elastic or thick rubber bands, a stapler, magic markers, crayons, glue, scissors, cotton balls, and if you're brave, washable paints and some cheap brushes. You could work with the art teacher on this project.

Cut the plate into a half mask to fit the students face. Or use a paper bag. Cut eye- holes. (Mouth holes if using a bag.) Then allow the students to decorate their own mask. They can make ears with the construction paper, cheek jowls with the cotton balls, etc. Attach the elastic or Rubber band with staples so the student may wear the mask and their hands can be free. Have them identify which character their mask represents. Display the masks.

Do an acting activity with the mask. Such as: When the Russian and Aleuts arrive on the Island of the Blue Dolphins allow the students to recreate the conversation between Chief Chowig and the Russian Captain. Or recreate the conversation between Nanko and Ulape when they are getting ready to get onto the ship. All these moments can be found in the text.

3. Character exploration with the use of a mask is a way for a student to make choices based on research and circumstances.

Activity: 15 Minutes – over a number of days – 3 – 5 students per session.

Have the student with their mask present their mask character be it human or animal. Encourage them to have taken information from the text and perhaps some extra research. Have them explain who they are, why they are here (on the island), and how long they have been here and how they spend their time. Encourage details.

4. Fabric (China Silk) is used to create water and blood, and to animate wind. Added to this are the actor's voices and the use of sound instruments.

Bring in some old scarves (they are often silk) and allow the students to experience using the material to help create atmosphere. How does the scarf cry, rain, blow wind, swim, run?

5. Storytelling is the ancient beginnings of theatre. There are a variety of ways to explore the art form with students. In our production we have taken long narrative sequences and broken it up into different voices. Reading aloud builds communication skills and self-confidence. It is important to "rehearse", however. Very few students are good at "cold readings".

Activity: 35 Minutes – 4 students in each grouping

Take the narrative that begins in Chapter 2 (3rd paragraph) "Our island is two leagues...."

Allow each of the 4 students to be the voice of Karana as she tells about her island.

This is easy to do, as there are so many narrative sections. Your whole class can read the book aloud by taking turns presenting different sections.

6. Putting it all together. The power of images, movement, and words.

Activity: 35 Minutes – any number of days - small groups of students.

Using all of the elements above, allow student groups to recreate sections of *Island of the Blue Dolphin*. By identifying the dogs, sea elephants, meeting Rontu, discovering the fallen birds from the nest as parts of the story to animate, the students can discover how to use the elements to establish effective and imaginative storytelling. The fabric can help to create location, atmosphere; the masks and stuffed animals to create characters and personality, and the storytelling form to encourage teamwork and linear structure.