

Life? It's A Circus!

Teacher Resource Pack

(Primary)



INTRODUCTION

Unlike many other forms of entertainment, such as theatre, ballet, opera, vaudeville, movies and television, the history of circus history is not widely known. The most popular misconception is that modern circus dates back to Roman times. But the Roman "circus" was, in fact, the precursor of modern horse racing (the Circus Maximus was a racetrack). The only common denominator between Roman and modern circuses is the word *circus* which, in Latin as in English, means "circle".

Circus has undergone something of a revival in recent decades, becoming a theatrical experience with spectacular costumes, elaborate lighting and soundtracks through the work of the companies such as *Circus Oz* and *Cirque du Soleil*.

But the more traditional circus, touring between cities and regional areas, performing under the big top and providing a more prosaic experience for families, still continues. The acts featured in these, usually family-run, circuses are generally consistent from circus to circus, with acrobatics, balance, juggling and clowning being the central skillsets featured, along with horsemanship, trapeze and tightrope work.

The circus that modern audiences know and love owes much of its popularity to film and literature, and the showmanship of circus entrepreneurs such as P.T. Barnum in the mid 1800s and bears little resemblance to its humble beginnings in the 18th century.

These notes are designed to give you a concise resource to use with your class and to support their experience of seeing *Life? It's A Circus!*

CLASSROOM CONTENT AND CURRICULUM LINKS

Essential Learnings: The Arts (Drama, Dance) Health and Physical Education (Personal Development)

Style/Form: Circus Theatre Physical Theatre Mime Clowning

Themes and Contexts: Examination of the circus style/form and performance techniques, adolescence, resilience, relationships

General Capabilities: Personal and Social Competence, Critical and Creative Thinking, Ethical Behaviour

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The modern circus was developed in England in the late 18th century by Philip Astley, a retired cavalry officer. A gifted horseman, Astley opened a riding school in London in 1768 where he taught in the mornings and demonstrated his riding prowess in the afternoons. A feature of the building where Astley ran his school was the circular arena that he called the *circle*, or *circus*, and which would later be known as the “ring”.

This circus ring had been devised by other performing “trick-riders” as it allowed audiences to keep sight of the riders during their performances. Riding in circles in a ring also made it possible, through the generation of centrifugal force, for riders to keep their balance while standing on the back of galloping horses. Astley's original ring was about sixty-two feet in diameter. Its size was eventually settled at a diameter of forty-two feet, which has since become the international standard for all circus rings.

By 1770, Astley had developed a considerable reputation as a performer. After two seasons in London, he decided that he needed to bring some variety to his performances. He hired acrobats, rope-dancers and jugglers, scheduling their acts between his own. Astley also added the clown, a character borrowed from the *commedia dell'arte*, who filled the gaps between acts with burlesques of juggling, tumbling, rope-dancing, and even trick-riding. The modern circus, with its mix of equestrian displays and feats of strength and agility, was born.

In 1782 Astley established a circus in Paris, but he also faced competition as other equestrians established their own acts. Charles Hughes, a former member of Astley's company, opened the Royal Circus and Equestrian Philharmonic Academy in London, and thus the *circus* got its name.

Circus entertainment spread throughout Europe, with temporary wooden structure erected to house the performances. Many of these were replaced with permanent buildings, establishing the European tradition of circus being housed and performed in a building.

The tradition of the travelling circus, with its huge canvas tent containing a temporary ring, developed in the United States in the early 1800s, where the population of the cities was too small to sustain a permanent circus. With the spread of settlers across the country, a unique American circus emerged - the traveling tent-show with a menagerie of exotic animals run by businessmen. This was a very different model from that of European circuses, which for the most part remained under the control of performing families.

In the 1870s, Phineas Taylor Barnum and his partner, William Coup, added a “museum”, containing human and animal oddities (the “freak show”), and thus establishing the Sideshow, and developed a system of rail transportation between towns (the circus train). Coup was also responsible for the addition of extra rings, and for developing the giant canvas tent to house them. The format of the touring circus of performers, animal acts and sideshow was adopted by a number of European companies in the early 20th century.

Contemporary circus appeared in the 1970s in Australia with Circus Oz, as well as in Canada, France, the UK and the United States. *Nouveau cirque* is generally performed in theatres and the emphasis is on conveying a story or a theme, with costume, music, lighting and storytelling lending a theatrical aesthetic to the genre.

LEARNING AND ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

Art Form Definitions

Acrobatics: Individual or partner skills involving strength and dexterity, including body rotations, twists, flips, balances, jumps and turns. Can be performed on tumbling mats, trampoline, tight wire or trapeze.

Aerial/aerialist: Circus acts performed in the air, on a suspended apparatus such as a trapeze, rope, cloud swing or aerial ring.

Bungee: A rubberized cord from which performers do aerial acts. A cord similar to what is used in bungee jumping. It is used to propel a performer into the air.

Clown: A character, often with a red nose who looks and acts 'out of place' and makes people laugh. There are many different kinds of Clowns: circus clowns, red nose clowns, bossy clowns, innocent clowns, sad clowns, and happy clowns. Clowns often make us laugh through their *physicality* - how they look, move and act and what they do, rather than what they say.

Clowning: The art of performing as a clown. Character clowns have exaggerated facial features, and are sometimes called hobo or tramp clowns.

Diabolo: A traditional Chinese circus apparatus, shaped like an hourglass with a metal axle in the middle. The artist manipulates this top-like equipment by a piece of string with handles at each end.

Ground Acrobatics: Acrobatics performed on (or in close proximity to) the ground.

Hand Balancing/ Handstand: An act in which the majority of skills involve the performer balancing on their hands. Can be completed on the floor or with the use of props such as a handstand platform, handstand bench, and handstand blocks.

High wire: A tight wire raised several metres above the ground. A very traditional circus act.

Hula Hoops: Circular plastic hoops approximately 80cm in diameter, used to twirl around different parts of the body. Performers can manipulate one or multiple hoops at the same time.

Juggling: The skill of keeping a number of objects in the air at the same time, by continuously throwing and catching the objects. Juggling requires good hand-eye coordination. The performer can use different methods to throw and catch the objects. Examples of objects used for juggling are clubs, rings, balls, scarves, knives, fire clubs, chainsaws, fruit, etc.

Manipulation: The act of manipulating objects. In circus, this term covers juggling, contact juggling, diabolo, devil sticks, hat & cigar manipulation, poi, staff twirling, meteor, yo-yo's, etc.

Mime and Non-verbal expression: Communicating without words, just with the face and body, creating and using imaginary objects

Pyramids: A human pyramid is a type of stunt/ act in which several participants stand or kneel together in a row or other formation, forming a base for another tier of participants who stand or kneel on their shoulders, backs or thighs. Successively smaller tiers of participants may be added, each tier supported by the one below it. Lighter participants are placed at the top of the formation, while the strongest participants form the base of the pyramid.

Slapstick: Physical comedy which uses slapping, kicking and use of comic timing. Could involve running into a door, appearing to get hurt, and exaggeration. Famous slapstick comedians include Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Laurel & Hardy and the Three Stooges.

Stilts: Timber or metal apparatus that is attached below the knee which the artist walks and performs tricks on. Stilts come in different heights and can be up to several meters high.

Trapeze: An aerial apparatus with a small round bar suspended by ropes or metal straps from the truss. This genre can include static, swinging and flying trapeze, and can be performed solo, double trapeze, triple trapeze or as a group act.

Tumble Track/Fast Track A strip of mat enabling a performer to do a sequence of tumbling.

Tumbling: A generic term to describe combinations of ground based acrobatic tricks. Tumbling can include cartwheel, round off, somersault, backflip, handspring, backflip, back/front sault, and somersaults with single or multiple rotations and twists.

Unicycle: A one-wheel bicycle with a small seat (or sometimes without a seat) upon which the performer rides forwards, backwards, performs jumps and other balancing skills. Unicycles come in different heights and different sized wheels.

KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS

Discuss and define the following terms with your class with respect to the performance of *Life? It's A Circus!*

Focus, balance, counter-balance, physical theatre, mime, acrobatic, clown, humour, heightened physicality, trust, juggling, acrobatics

KEY QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORATION AND CONSIDERATION

- What are some of the acts you might see in a circus?
- What skills might a circus performer need?
- What is the role of the clown in circus?
- What skills does a clown need in circus?
- What does an acrobat do?
- What does a juggler do?

LINKS TO THE CURRICULIUM

The following learning experiences provide an entry point to the style of the performance and its thematic investigations.

Pre-performance Activities

Making and Presenting

Warm up: Exploring physical and gestural aspects of comedy

Students walking around the room as if:

- *They are 50 kilograms heavier*
- *Their knees have turned to jelly*
- *They can't control their legs and arms*
- *They are invisible and can move silently*

Discuss with class what characters are suggested by some of the movements.

- Students to create frozen statues of the following actions: the best day of your life, a sad day, trying to help someone, feeling hopeful, shrugging your shoulders, losing your temper, controlling your temper, feeling proud, feeling worried, feeling scared, feeling brave.
- Students in groups to create a freeze frame that captures the following: "I wasn't a part of the group". Present to class, discuss the implicit narratives/stories in the frames. Discuss how to overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Students in groups to create a freeze frame that captures a group of people getting along and enjoying an event. Discuss what factors and conditions help this to happen. E.g. people take their turn and listen to each other.

Exercise 1: Pass the Face

Students begin the warm up in a circle. One person begins and pulls a facial expression; however, this must be subtle. They pass this face on to the person next to them who then increases the size of the facial expression. As the face is passed around the circle it gets bigger and bigger until it reaches the last person in the circle.

Exercise 2: Something it's Not

Select any object. It might be a ruler. Students sit/stand in a circle. When the object is passed to them they must mime using it as something it is not. There are to be no words used. They may use the ruler as a microphone, a telephone, a fairy wand etc. Encourage the students to be as creative as they can and go with the first thing that comes to their mind.

Exercise 3: Inanimate Objects

Students walk about the space, avoiding eye contact and ensuring that they use the whole space. The teacher calls out the names of inanimate objects that the students must make with their bodies. By becoming these inanimate objects they are able to hide from whoever is 'chasing' them. A classic chase scene!

- Chair
- Table
- Lamp
- Pot plant
- Sculpture

Exercise 4: Focus

All students stand in a circle with their eyeline focussed on the centre of the circle. Without being cued, the group is to try to clap (once) in unison. If they manage to do this, try again. If really doing well, try to jump together!

Exercise 6: Trust

Students are to work in pairs. One is blindfolded. Their partner is to guide them through a space. The objective of the activity is to enable the person who is blindfolded to gain trust in their partner. The person leading is also developing skills in being a trustworthy partner.

Exercise 7: Counter balance

Students are to stand with their partners back-to-back, their arms and hands by their sides. They are to try and sit down whilst still back-to-back. They then need to try and stand again. Students will find that they need to work together in order to do this.

Exercise 8: Readiness

Continuing to work in their pairs, one partner nominates to go first and lies on the floor with their legs out straight and arms by their sides. They are to intentionally be floppy as they lie there. Their partner is to try to lift/move them - they will find this difficult! In contrast, the partner lying on the floor is to tense their body. This time, when their partner tries to lift/move them, they will find this much easier! This is performance readiness. In circus, bodies must be engaged and ready to make the balances and tricks etc. possible!

Exercise 9: Ensemble

Students form groups of four or five. They nominate a leader and stand in a clump formation. As a group, they are to move through the space, taking direction from their leader i.e. changing direction, moving in a particular way. The direction is non-verbal i.e. there is to be no talking. Once the group gets going, individuals are, without talking, to take over leading the group.

Whole class debrief

Reflection on all of the activities and the key skills explored - focus, trust, counter balance, readiness and ensemble. The students are to look out for these and try to spot them during their viewing of *Life? It's a Circus!*

Responding

- Paired activity: Students work with a partner to develop a list of circus acts make a poster to present to the class.

What makes it funny?

1. Students watch each excerpt from the list below. Each performance incorporates different elements that make it comedic.

Comedic Excerpts

Mr. Bean – Sandwich for lunch

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtqpuYvOfHY>

Charlie Chaplin - Escape from the Police

https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DufeMOIYUGBU%26feature%3Drelated+

Laurel and Hardy Water Fight

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSJcYzN-vIE>

Gromic Visual Comedy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7A4UsKncSc>

CIRCUS ACTS

Clowning

The attributes of a clown are playfulness, irreverence, and the freedom of 'not knowing'. In ancient Greece comics were bald-headed and padded to appear larger than normal. They performed as secondary figures in farces and mime, parodying the actions of more serious characters. In Roman mime the clown wore a pointed hat and a patchwork colourful robe and was the target for the tricks and abuse.

The clown emerged as a professional comic actor in the late Middle Ages. Court jesters and fools were influences for travelling entertainers. Italian commedia dell'arte, improvised masked comedy with stock plots also developed many stock clown characters, including Arlecchino (Harlequin) in the 16th century. Harlequin began as a comic valet, or zanni, but soon developed into an acrobatic trickster, wearing a black domino mask and carrying a bat or noisy slapstick with which he frequently hit his victims. Pierrot was another Zanni, always the butt of jokes and pranks, he was the lowest of low in society. Commedia also had lazzi, or humorous interludes.

The 3 traditional types of clowns are the White-face, Auguste and Character.

White-face Clown

The White-face clown is the 'classic' clown, the oldest and most well-known of the clowns, and is typically the straight clown in skits.

Associated with the circus, the White-face is the most intelligent type of clown with the highest status - typically the ringleader. The make-up base of white grease paint meant distant audiences could see the clown.

This is the oldest style of clown, dating back to Greek theatre. Whiteface is the court jester of the Middle Ages. Commedia del arté popularised several stock clown characters, including Pierrot, Columbine, Harlequin and Clown. Pierrot is a White-face clown. His flour-whitened face is thought to be the introduction of the White-face.

Auguste Clown

The Auguste clown is the least intelligent, and zaniest of the clowns. The Auguste clown tends to be the silly clown in skits. Make-up is a flesh-tone base, with features outlined. The costume of the Auguste clown tends to be gaudy, mismatched, over-sized and very bright.

In the 1860s, or so the story goes, a low-comedy comic appeared under the name of Auguste, who had a big nose, baggy clothes, and large shoes. He worked with a White-face clown and always spoiled the tricks by appearing at the wrong time to mess things up.

The red nose was introduced by Albert Fratellini in the 20th century.

Character Clown

The Hobo or Tramp clown is the most popular character clown, although character clowns can be police officers, women, or babies - any character at all.

The Hobo usually has tattered clothes, a tattered hat, make-up which suggests he is unshaven, exaggerated features and a red nose. The generic Tramp character is 'down-on-his-luck'. The Tramp clown is an American creation, and Charlie Chaplin is the most famous of these.

Guiding Questions

- What is a clown?
- When did the art of clowning begin?

The Art of Being a Clown

- What are the characteristics of a clown?
- What are the three main clown types?
- Ask the students if they have ever seen a clown.
- Discuss what a clown is, the origins of clowning, clowns as they relate to the circus and the characteristics of three types of clowns: the whiteface clown, the Auguste clown and the tramp or hobo clown. Look at pictures of the 3 types of clowns
- Discussion follows where questions are asked, answered and information is reviewed.
- Students draw a pictures of the 3 types of clowns.

Juggling

Equipment: Juggling rings, balls, and scarves, peacock feathers, hula hoops, diabolos

Guiding Questions

- What does a juggler do?
- Have you ever juggled?
- How does it feel to juggle?
- Describe what it looks like when a juggler is juggling rings, scarves, or balls?
- Have you ever used a hula hoop?
- How do you keep the hoop off the ground?
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Activity1 : Feather Balancing Trick

Equipment: straight peacock feather

Step 1: Hold out hand, palm facing up.

Step 2: Position feather in centre of hand.

Step 3: Keep feather straight and upright by adjusting hand position and moving with the feather as needed.

Activity 2: Learn About Circus Skills

Hula Hoop

<http://www.hulahooping.com/how-to-hoop.html>

Juggling balls

http://www.frontiernet.net/%7Esteve_glimpse/juggle.html

Juggling scarves

<http://juggling-for-beginners.com/store/juggling-scarves/>

Diabolo

<http://www.diabolotricks.net/gettingstarted.html>

Activity 3: Read *If I Ran the Circus* by Dr. Seuss.

- Discuss what acts students would want in their own circus.
- Have students create their own fantasy circus using the equipment to create their own act.

Post-performance Activities

Making and presenting

- **Clown**– Students are to select one of the ‘clowns’ within ‘Life? It’s a Circus!’ and explain what they liked about that clown.
- Have them draw a scene from the play.

Responding

- Students to reflect on *Life? It’s a Circus!*
- What were the stories that were told? How were these communicated through performance techniques?
- Did you spot some of the key circus skills being used? i.e. focus, trust, counter balance, readiness and ensemble. How were these integrated into the performance?

Web Links

http://www.circopedia.org/SHORT_HISTORY_OF_THE_CIRCUS

<http://www.circusesandsideshow.com>

http://afterdarktheatre.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=out=log&id=53&Itemid=166

http://www.nica.com.au/circus-dictionary.php?cd_id=31

<https://www.scribd.com/doc/139351228/1956-If-I-Ran-the-Circus-Dr-Seuss>

http://smirkus.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/SmirkusRes_Curriculum_Guide.pdf

<https://hobbylark.com/performing-arts/10-Warm-Ups-For-Clowns>

<http://www.simplycircus.com/sites/default/files/em4882.pdf>