That's All Folks!
Teacher Resource Pack
Primary

HOMUNCULUS
THEATRE CO.

INTRODUCTION

Audiences have been delighted and entertained by circus and vaudeville acts for generations. The combination of short performances, showcasing music, dance, comedy and magic, was hugely successful among the working classes during the 19th century, alongside burlesque and minstrel shows, up until the 1930s.

That's' All Folks blends the ideas from vaudeville, or short and entertaining acts, with the skills of modern circus and slapstick clowning to create an energetic show featuring separate yet interlinked routines that explore different characters and situations throughout the history of the theatre.

The actors use a range of circus and clowning skills including juggling, acrobalance, bell routines, slapstick, comical routines, musical chairs, improvisation and audience participation to create an entertaining performance reminiscent of the variety shows of yesteryear.

These notes are designed to give you a concise resource to use with your class and to support their experience of seeing *That's All Folks!*

CLASSROOM CONTENT AND CURRICULUM LINKS

Essential Learnings: The Arts (Drama), SOSE (History, Culture), English

Style/Form: Vaudeville, Commedia dell'Arte, Mask, Traditional and Contemporary Clowning, Melodrama, Visual Theatre, Physical Theatre, Physical Comedy, Circus, non-verbal communication and Mime, Improvisation and Slapstick.

Themes and Contexts: Creativity and imagination, awareness, relationships.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Vaudeville

Vaudeville was a uniquely American phenomenon and was the most popular form of American entertainment for around fifty years, from its rise in the 1880s, until the 1930s. It played much the same a role in people's lives that radio and later television would for later generations. Many early radio, television and film stars began as vaudeville performers, including Bob Hope, Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers and Stan Laurel. Indeed, the popularity of radio, film and television is what led to the demise of vaudeville.

Taking its name from the French term for the songs from the Vire region, vaudeville was also marketed as variety entertainment, and it consisted of a highly diverse series of very short acts, or "turns." The acts ranged from singing groups to animal acts, from comedians to contortionists, from magic tricks to short musical plays and even opera and ballet. A typical vaudeville bill consisted of approximately 13 acts, most of which were typically 6-15 minutes long.

Vaudeville appealed to a broad cross-spectrum of the public. The wealthiest patrons could purchase exclusive box seats, while working class spectators could purchase inexpensive seats in the stalls. Vaudeville had something for everyone, and particular acts in the vaudeville lineup appealed differently to different groups in the audience depending on their heritage or place in society.

Variety entertainment emerged gradually throughout the nineteenth century, starting in circus sideshows, concert halls, saloons, burlesque theatres, minstrel shows, and dime-museum performances (dime-museums were large-scale venues dedicated to 'freak shows,' masquerading as educational entertainment). These early forms of variety theatre appealed mainly to working class men and had an ugly reputation. Most cities had a dedicated vaudeville theatre. In contrast, circus in the United States was developed as a touring spectacle.

Circus

First appearing in London in 1768, circus was developed by retired cavalry officer Philip Astley to showcase his riding skills. It took its name (from the Latin *circus,* meaning circle) from the circular yard in which he performed. Astley soon decided that he needed to bring some variety to his performances, hiring acrobats, rope-dancers and jugglers, and scheduling their acts between his own. He also added the clown, a character borrowed from the *commedia dell'arte*, to fill the gaps between acts with burlesques (parodies) 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.

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 mostly 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.

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.

1. 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 dell'arte* 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.

2. 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.

3. Character Clown

The Hobo or Tramp clown is the most popular character clown and had its origins in vaudeville.

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.

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.

Ad Lib: Short for "ad libitum" (Latin for "at will"): to perform dialog or business made up by a performer on the spot (and not rehearsed or in the script). Doing an ad-lib might be necessary (to disguise some problem, like another performer forgetting a line). It might also spring from an inspired burst of creativity or from an unprofessional and undisciplined choice to 'show off'. In any case, ad-libs are risky (they might surprise other performers enough to break their concentration).

Alley-Oop: An Acrobatic or gymnastic act. The performers (often European) were often heard to cue their team members (in French) "allez" ("everybody") and then either "up" in English, or a simple vocalization like "hup" to coordinate timing.

All Washed Up: A performer was "all washed up" when he could no longer get a booking anywhere. Usually a condition that occurred when he had proven unreliable or just not very good, or when the style of his day was no longer popular.

Apron: The part of the stage projecting out past the proscenium.

Baggy Pants Comic: A performer (often a fulltime employee of a single theater) whose act consisted of coarse, slapstick humor.

Belting: Describes singing done in a vivid "chest voice" rather than a more classical "head voice" or "legit voice". Some singers, like Ethel Merman, belted all the time, while others use the technique when dramatic emphasis is needed.

(the) Bill: The program or list of acts, in order of performance. As in "who else is on the bill?"

Billing: The names of performers as displayed on a theater's marquee and in its advertising. A performer's status is indicated by the size and placement of their name (who is higher or more prominently billed). Not just a matter of opinion but a matter of detailed legal

negotiations. Billing is still an important measure of a performer's status in theater and film, with the most prominent artists ranking 'name above the title' billing.

Bomb: To perform an act that elicits little more than boredom.

Claque: A group of audience members paid to respond enthusiastically to an act, and sometimes to boo a performer's competitors.

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

Crossover: A stock comedy routine, easy to put together because it needed no involved setup. Two performers enter from opposite sides of the stage, meet in the middle for a bit of comic dialogue, then each exits in the direction he was going. For instance, one guy has a suitcase … "Where are you going?" "I'm taking my case to court." (They meet again, the guy now has a ladder.) "Where are you going now?" "I'm taking my case to a higher court." In another, one guy has a black eye … "What happened to you?" "I was living the life of Riley." (Slang for 'the easy life') "So what happened?" "Riley came home!"

Dark: Describes a theater in which there is no performance on a particular night.

Died: Played to perfunctory applause or none at all.

Finish: The finale of an act, especially when it contrasts with the rest of the act (the performers in a comedy act might break into a song and dance, or finish with a pie in the face or some other effect.)

Gagging: Adding "ad lib" remarks or other business into an act unexpectedly during performance. A performer might "gag" in the same sense he could "upstage" someone, aggressively drawing attention or throwing the other performer into confusion.

Get the Hook: To be such a bad performer that you were dragged offstage mid-performance by the stage manager, using a long hook like a shepherd's crook (ostensibly to avoid having a stagehand be seen by the audience). "The hook" was reportedly introduced in 1903 at Harry Miner's Bowery Theater in New York, when novice performers could try their skill in "amateur night" competitions, exposing themselves to harsh judgment by the audience. Often the management knew that some of the acts were terrible, and booked them for no other purpose than to bring the hook into play and get a laugh from the audience.

Ghost Light: A single bare bulb on a head-high stand, left lit on the stage overnight for safety. A variety of legends have been concocted for the ghost light (like "it placates the ghosts who haunt the theater") but it is required by safety laws because a pitch-black theater, with its pits and easily-dislodged hanging scenery, is a hazardous place.

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.

Hoofer: Dancer.

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.

Lazzo: From *commedia dell'arte*, a recurring bit (running gag) that builds comic impact by repetition.

Mugging: Making faces and over-exaggerating lines, trying too hard to get a laugh.

One-Liner: A joke made up of only one or two sentences.

Revue: Like a vaudeville show, a revue consists of sketches, songs, and comedians. However, instead of changing its acts weekly, a revue has a longer run, and the acts might be tied together with a central concept, for example Ziegfeld's.

Running Gag: A joke or physical bit which appears several times throughout the show, gaining momentum each time through its familiarity and through its appearance in a new context.

Schtick: Yiddish for a "bit." Exaggerated, stylized business or clowning.

Sight Gag: A joke which conveys its humor visually.

Sketch: A short acted scene, almost always comic, with two or more performers. There is only the most rudimentary plot and the simplest characters (e.g. "a couple on a date" interacting with "a waiter").

Slapstick: Knockabout physical comedy, named for the "slapstick," a bat-like paddle with a flap that emits a huge "slap" sound when struck.

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.

Stooge: A comic aide to a comedian, often a performer who pretends to be a "volunteer" called up to help from out of the audience. A magician may also employ a stooge to give the appearance of performing miraculous effects on a randomly chosen audience member (the stooge).

Straight Man: Half of a comic team, the performer who plays the "average Joe," the person the audience can identify with, who meets or converses with someone odd, resulting in comical situations.

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.

KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS
Discuss and define the following terms with your class with respect to the performance of
That's All Folks!

Focus, balance, counter-balance, physical theatre, mime, acrobatic, clown, humour, heightened physicality, trust, gagging, sight-gag, slapstick, sketch.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORATION AND CONSIDERATION
• What skills might a circus performer need?
• What changes had occurred in circus performances in recent years?
• What is the role of the clown in circus?
• What skills does a clown need in circus?

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

DRAMA
Pre-performance Activities
Making and Presenting

Warm up 1: 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.

Exercise 1: Dolphin Training
- Students sit in a row as an audience. One student leaves the room. The class decides on a simple thing we want them to do when they come back, for instance picking up a certain chair and sitting on it. When they come back into the room the audience guide them to complete the task by clapping, there is no spoken word or negative feedback. For instance if they walk close to the chair there would be a loud applause, if they pick it up louder applause, if they walk away from the chair the applause stops, and when they complete there is a huge applause.
- Encourage them to stay connected to the audience, be brave in trying different things at the start, but also be very present with the audience so they can work out exactly what it is that is making them clap. They will also have to learn to often 'get out of their box' and just try something completely different when they are stuck in a rut.

Exercise 2: Waking Up As If You've Never Seen The World Before
- The whole class lies down somewhere on the floor or couches with eyes shut and partly asleep. As they wake up it's as if they've never seen any of this stuff before. Their own hands are fascinating, the carpet, the ceiling. Gradually they become aware of other people. Innocent and naive.

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?
- 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

Post-performance Activities
Making and presenting
- Students work with a partner to develop a vaudeville-style sketch. After rehearsing, show to the rest of the class.

Responding
- Students to reflect on *That's All Folks!*
- Which circus styles and performance techniques were utilised in this performance?
- 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?
- Describe the type of clowning that you observed and document the performance techniques used.

Web Links
http://www.goodmagic.com/carny/vaud.htm
http://cultureandcommunication.org/deadmedia/index.php/Dime_Museums
http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ma02/easton/vaudeville/vaudevillemain.html
http://www.virtualvaudeville.com/hypermediaNotes/WhatIsVaudevilleF.html
http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/bobhope/vaude.html
http://www.circopedia.org/SHORT_HISTORY_OF_THE_CIRCUS
http://www.circusesandsideshows.com
http://afterdarktheatre.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&Ia%20yout=blog&id=53&Itemid=166
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