2008-2009
HOT SEASON FOR
YOUNG PEOPLE PRESENTS

CIRCUS
INcognitus

Jamie Adkins
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Dear Teachers,

Prepare yourselves and your students to be amazed, amused, touched, and just plain delighted with Circus Incognito! The spirit of the performance captures some of the best qualities that we encourage in our children: curiosity, engagement, and a joyful resilience that despite obstacles, keeps them trying to discover and master the world around them.

Enjoy!

TPAC Education

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Guidebook written and compiled by Lattie Brown with contributions and advice from Jamie Adkins, Jacob Weiss, Jeff Gordon, Leigh Jones, Cassie LaFevor, and TPAC Teaching Artists.

All performance photos of Jamie Adkins are credited to Amanda Russell.
Jamie Adkins began his career at the age of 13 in San Diego, where he delighted passers-by as a street performer. He later moved up the coast to San Francisco, where he joined the famous Pickle Family Circus. The group provided a great place to hone his skills, but soon this eclectic clown, juggler, and balance artist joined Montréal’s Cirque Éloize. With his multidisciplinary talents and years of experience, he was soon an integral member of the Cirque Éloize family of artists. In over 500 performances of the show, *Excentricus*, Jamie distinguished himself with a unique style that faithfully and humorously conveyed the essence of the ordinary man.

Jamie again teamed up with Cirque Éloize to produce *Typo*, a show of his own creation, which toured the world giving more than 200 performances over 2 years. He won the admiration of audiences and critics as well as a 2005 Drama Desk Award nomination for his three week run at the New Victory Theater in New York City.

Jamie has also been awarded the prestigious Annie Fratellini prize for clowns and a bronze medal at the 2006 Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain in Paris. He continues to seek new ways to develop his artistry, and his newest creation, *Circus INcognitus*, recently won Best Comedy at the 2007 Montreal Fringe Festival.

For the fall of 2008, he joins the cast of the Cirque de Soleil production of *Wintuk* at New York’s Madison Square Gardens, before resuming touring of *Circus INcognitus* throughout the United States in 2009.
Jamie Adkins fuses his circus talents with a strong theatrical sensibility. He devises an entertaining escapade, testing his unique problem-solving abilities against everyday tasks as well as feats of tremendous physical skill. Just retrieving a piece of paper from inside a large cardboard box becomes a funny ordeal. He transforms his props and set pieces into onstage cohorts that seem determined not to cooperate with his efforts. The result is both hilarity and wonderment as he tackles obstacles with an inventive playfulness, overcoming them with trial and error, sheer skill, or by seeming accident.

His humble little character communicates happily in every way with the audience until he tries to talk. At the microphone, shyness and nerves overwhelm him, and he can’t manage to speak his mind.

A few elements of the show...

Clowning
Jamie Adkins does not wear clown make-up or an exaggerated costume. His physical humor and wordless performance are more reminiscent of silent film clowns such as Charlie Chaplin.

Slack Wire
Most students will be familiar with tight wire walking. Even if they have not seen it, they have probably seen a reference in a storybook, on film, or television. Slack wire walking is exactly what it says. Instead of the wire being tight so that it bounces when struck, a slack wire will swing. The skills are similar for both types, and many wire walkers can do both. Slack wire balance uses the hips more than the arms, but either type requires balance and concentration. The wire set-up itself requires a specialized knowledge of engineering: tension, cable strength, and rigging.

Stilt Walking
Jamie Adkins does not employ traditional stilt walking in his performance, but he does use skills similar to stilt walking with two tall wooden ladders.

Juggling
Jamie Adkins juggles a variety of objects with ease, but the true thrill comes with watching the combination of other elements with juggling. He juggles on the slack wire and he even juggles with his mouth.
What makes something funny?

“What humor seems to be one of those subjects that the more you try to figure out what it is, the further you end up from the answer. The old cliche, much to the dismay of many a clown student, is that humor cannot be taught. You can, however, through much studying, practice and research, improve your technique of getting laughs and understand better what you find funny. There are tools which can be used to be more effective or to give a vocabulary to what someone is doing instinctively. There are many just and valid rules in comedy, but the most important one is: There are no rules. Every rule or thought I have heard about what makes comedy, I find that the opposite is also true.”

How do you approach creating a show?

“For myself, I try not to write for other people, not even my potential audience. There is no guessing what other people will find funny. The best I can do is present a show which is filled with bits and gags that I find funny. The audience will let me know through laughter, applause or silence what they think. In this way, the audience acts as a guide of how far you can push a gag to make it funnier or what extra bits you can add to keep them laughing. The initial joke is a true shot in the dark. If as a clown/comedian I begin with a joke that I find funny, even if the audience reacts with silence, I will take their reaction not that it was not funny, but that I did not convey it correctly. If I myself am not sure whether a joke was funny and the audience reacts unfavorably, I might agree with them and throw the gag away. Mostly in my show I do not try to do or say funny things, but I try to be funny. Which is a very long conversation.”

What advice would you give students beginning to explore clowning and comedy?

“For teaching comedy my best advice is: Everyone is funny in their own way without trying to be funny. Human beings have developed laughter as a great strength against adversity. A good place to find out what makes you funny is to share what makes you afraid, ashamed, angry, sad, happy, embarrassed; any emotion will do as long as it’s true. Humor is an act of sharing. A lot of comedy can be found in the comedians’ and the audiences’ reaction to sharing. I am dyslexic, asthmatic, extremely shy, mildly afraid of heights, insecure, and these have been some of my greatest assets as a comedian on stage.”
Jamie Adkins uses the circus arts to create his one-man show. The circus arts of balancing, acrobatics, juggling, clowning, aerial work, and animal training have a rich history, some dating back to early Greek and Egyptian civilizations. There is a special reason they have been part of most cultures in some way for so long. The circus arts at their best combine skills that seem to defy all rules of human ability and behavior, while at same time producing a poetry that moves us to connect and respond to something deeply human. In other words, they inspire us and teach us to play.

In the early 20th century, our North American circuses became primarily valued for the grand scale spectacle, with producers seeking more impressive skills and thrills, everything more exotic, more unusual, more flashy, in larger quantities, and in more extreme sizes.

In the 1960’s, various circus lovers and performers began to long for a different type of circus, one in which artistry and an intimate connection with the audience was emphasized. By the mid 1970’s, circuses with a new outlook began to emerge. They went from the chaos of three rings to one ring, demanding a new quality of attention from the audience. Many focused only on what people could do instead of relying on animal acts. Some shows developed themes and storylines. The Pickle Family Circus, the Big Apple Circus, and most famously, Cirque de Soleil, provided an appealing alternative to the dominant commercial circus, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey. These new circuses borrowed from the other fine arts: theatre, dance, and music to re-interpret their own art form, creating beautiful and new expressions of human achievement.
Many people think that clowning is just acting silly and don’t realize the amount of study, practice, and creative planning required to become a good clown. Clowns work on character development, comic timing, pace, focus, surprise, blocking, setups, improvisation, storytelling, prop management and invention, physical and emotional communication.

Clowning is not limited only to circus clowns in bright make-up and red bulb noses. Clowns appear in all kinds of guises; the art of clowning is found on Broadway, in Shakespeare, in rodeos, in hospitals, in festivals, on television, as well as in the circus. Many types of performers incorporate clowning skills into their work.

Think about the following concepts that are crucial to the art of clowning. They place our focus on what makes a clown on the inside as much as what shows on the outside.

**Character**

Though they may seem alike, each clown develops a unique character based in and on his or her personality traits and interests. Clowns use their own emotions and experiences to create someone authentic and believable even in the midst of ridiculous circumstances.

**Audience Relationship**

Clowns live in conversation with the audience. Most clown performances include a realization and open acknowledgement of the audience by the character that we are watching. The audience is not the removed observer looking through an imaginary “fourth wall” as in many other types of performing arts.

**Mistakes**

Clowns embrace failure. For a clown, each mistake is an opportunity for laughter.

**Props with Personalities**

Clowns give certain props personalities and turn them into adversaries or helpers. By making them “alive” in a sense, they help create an imaginary world in which to operate and bend the rules in order to make us laugh.

**Sense of discovery**

Part of the charm of a clown is that they have a level of innocence, and their discovery of how to negotiate the world

“When a clown makes us laugh, he or she touches something deep inside our consciousness. Any artist would want to know how to do that.”

from *Be a Clown* by Mark Stolzenburg
Both clowns and comedians often follow the “rule of three.” Whether as a joke or a physical bit, the “rule of three” organizes words or actions into triplets, with the first two elements establishing a pattern, and the third and last element breaking the pattern. The third element provides a contrast that produces anything from a raised eyebrow to uncontrollable laughter. The whole thing becomes a miniature story (with a beginning, middle and end) that sets up a certain expectation for a predictable conclusion, but then takes a detour with surprising and entertaining results.

Objective: Students will experiment creating surprise and possibly humor using the “rule of three.”

First: Introduce students to the “rule of three.” Read what Jamie Adkins says about the elusiveness of humor at right and on page 4.

Second: As a class, create an example of the “rule of three.” Give students a set-up sentence, and ask them to complete it with a group of three words or phrases: the first two similar, and then the last different or even opposite. The last word (or phrase) should be surprising. Surprise is much easier to achieve than humor, and can be funny in itself.

Example: “My little brother’s favorite TV shows are...Barney, Dora the Explorer and Masterpiece Theatre.” OR “When setting the table for dinner, you need plates, napkins, and silly string.”

More sentence set-ups could be: My favorite foods are...; When I grow up I want to be a..., a...or a...; The best presents I ever received were... Stress that these aren’t true statements, but made-up ones to surprise readers or listeners.

Third: Discuss why a surprise is funny. (“It just is!” is an acceptable answer!) In saying these sentences, what else can contribute to making us laugh? Does tone of voice, timing, or movement affect us?

Note: Even the “class clown” may have a hard time with purposefully creating humor.

Last: Ask students to create their own examples of the “rule of three.” Let them share their creations with a partner. As a class, discuss making the sentences. What was easy? What was difficult? Did your partner write a funny sentence that you can share with the class?

For older students: Ask students to try the “rule of three” with actions. Ask them to devise a grouping of three actions. The first two actions don’t have to be similar, but they do have to relate to each other. Encourage students to choose actions and props that can take place or be found in the classroom. Make sure to prohibit falling or pretending to fall.

Example: Actions: pass out a pencil to a student, pass out a piece of paper, pass out a hairbrush. It’s not particularly funny, but a surprising grouping.

Explore what happens, though, if the person passing things out suddenly realizes they have passed out a hairbrush. How do they feel? Can the reaction of the person who receives the hairbrush be funny? Using these first two actions as a set-up, can the students think of a funny third action?

Most clowns write their own sketches, routines or shows. It takes a lot of thought and planning to make things funny, and there is no set formula. Jamie Adkins says: “I do use the ‘rule of three’ mostly in terms of rhythm. There is something magical about the rhythm of three, but the opposite is also true and 1,4 and 5 can be quite funny, too. Two rules I have that do not contradict themselves in any way is ‘never repeat yourself, always leave ‘em wanting more,’ and ‘If it’s funny once, it’s funny six times.’ The trick is finding out which one is true for the moment you are in.”
Standing on one foot makes us aware of our ability to balance. We must concentrate on not falling over. Though we are not as consciously aware of it, we still need balance when we are standing on both feet, or even when we are sitting. Our system of balance is the result of complicated interactions of several senses and systems of the body. These systems include the inner ear and our vision, as well as the parts of the brain that interpret and coordinate the information coming from these areas.

The balance system detects the position and movement of the head in three-dimensional space. When our head knows where it is, whether it is sideways or upright or upside-down, it can control our balance, sometimes without our knowing it.

The primary part of our body that manages our balance is the set of little fluid-filled, curved tubes inside our ears called the semicircular canals. The fluid responds to our body position, and tiny hairs inside these tubes report to our brain the placement of the fluid.

Wire walkers develop their balancing ability to a degree of precision that seems impossible.

Left: Jamie Adkins on the slack wire.

Below: Phillipe Petit in 1974, on his famous tight wire walk between the towers of the World Trade Center.

Try This:

Fill a soda bottle halfway with liquid, and put on the top. Watch the angle of the water level. It will show you whether you are tilting the bottle or holding it straight. This is (very simply) what your semicircular canals can tell you about whether you are tilted or not. Gently shake up the liquid in the bottle and watch it settle down. This is an approximation of what you do to your semicircular canals when you spin in circles until you are dizzy.
One key to finding your balance is being able to notice and manage your center of gravity. On an object, the center of gravity is the exact spot around which the weight of the object is perfectly balanced. Try balancing an object like a cafeteria tray on one hand; if you can find the center of gravity, you know exactly where to place your hand to keep the tray from falling. All its weight will be balanced around its center of gravity on top of your hand.

Your body has a center of gravity, too. It is much harder to point to, because our bodies are not a simple shape, but you can feel it.

For older students:
Older students can better understand the concept of gravity as an attraction between objects according to their mass and distance from each other. The only objects large enough that enable us to notice this attraction are in the moon, star and planetary size categories.

The force of gravity pulls our bodies towards the earth, and our center of gravity is the point at which the force of gravity is most concentrated. If our center is located over a stable base (our feet, knees, seat, or hands-in a handstand), creating a line of gravity perpendicular to the earth, all is well, but if the center of gravity moves too far off the base, the balance of weight around the center cannot be maintained, and gravity will cause us to fall over.

A balance artist must necessarily be concerned with the effect gravity has on the body. They must operate in cooperation with their center of gravity even though they explore its very limits.
Balancing Yourself

Objective: Students will explore their personal balance abilities.

First: Ask students to try several of the balancing poses below. Make sure that the leg they keep on the ground is not stiffly locked back at the knee but relaxed and even slightly bent. Vary the length of time for each pose according to their abilities, as well as to challenge them as they get better.

Poses to try: leg bent at the knee behind them ◆ raise knee in front of them ◆ leg extended in front of them six inches from the ground ◆ leg straight out in front as high as they can get it ◆ leg out to the side ◆ knee bent in back while holding foot with hand ◆ knee bent perpendicular while holding foot in front.

Next: Ask students to face a partner and stand with their feet about twelve inches apart. One partner moves from standing on two feet to standing on one foot; the other partner watches what happens. Have partners watch each other a few times and describe what they see. They are observing their partner’s center of gravity shift. Try more balancing poses with the new knowledge your center of gravity changes with your position.

For older children: As they balance, ask students to try to feel their center of gravity, to feel the spot around which they have to balance their body. They may think that their one foot on the ground is the spot around which they balance. If they extend their leg to the side off the ground at least a foot, they will be forced to adjust with their hips and upper body in a way that will help demonstrate that the center point is not their foot, but higher up above their foot.

Discuss: Can students point to their center of gravity? What positions were easiest? Which were most challenging? Did paying attention to your center of gravity help them to balance? Note: Keep in mind that a boy’s center of gravity will tend to be higher than a girl’s.

Balancing Yourself 2

Objective: Students will learn strategies to improve balance.

First: Balance is effected by our vision, our concentration and our sense of touch. Choose one of the more difficult balancing poses from above, and ask students to keep make sure to keep their heads level and still. Have them focus on one point or object directly across from them in the room.

Next: Try the following variations while using the same pose:
◆ Ask students to imagine that the leg they will balance on is a tree with deep roots extending into the ground. Ask them to concentrate on those roots and visualize them.
◆ Ask students to close their eyes.
◆ Ask students to think about wobbling. There should be funny results.
◆ Ask students to balance on one leg and imagine the wind blowing at them, and then abruptly the wind stops and the air is still.

Discuss: How did what students pictured in their mind affect their balance? Which positions were more difficult to hold? Did they get better or worse as they practiced more?

Try this! Center of Gravity Proof

Turn your right side to the wall. Put your right foot and cheek against the wall. Now try to lift your left foot off the floor. Why can’t you do it?

The wall is trapping your center of gravity. You cannot move it over your right foot in order to lift the left one. Because you cannot move the center of gravity, the force of gravity keeps your foot on the ground.
Objective: Students will learn how the center of gravity changes when weight is added to an object.

First: Have pairs of students take an index card and predict where the card’s center of gravity is located. (This is the spot where the card will balance flat on your finger tip.) Ask them to mark that spot with a pencil.

Second: Ask students to place the dot on the tip of their index finger to see if it balances. If it does, they have found the center of gravity. If the card does not balance, ask them to observe how much it tilts and in what direction it tilts. Students can use this information to move the card on their finger tip. When the card balances, their finger is on the center of gravity. Their partner can help them mark that spot.

Third: Give students a paper clip to attach to one corner of the card. The weight of the paper clip will change the card’s center of gravity. Partners should each put a dot on the card where they think the new center of gravity will be with their initials next to their dot. Each student then places his or her dot on a finger tip to find the center of gravity as they did before. Partners mark the new center of gravity, and then measure with a ruler to see whose prediction was closer.

Cool new vocabulary

funambulism ~ tightrope walking
Etymology: Latin funambulus ropewalker, from funis, rope + ambulare, to walk

equilibrist ~ one (as a rope dancer) who performs difficult feats of balancing

slacklining ~ a new sport that emerged in California in the 1980s, when bored mountain climbers started playing with their climbing webbing, attaching it around two trees, to develop a version of slack wire walking competition.

highlining ~ another variation of the sport which involves walking a slackline at incredible heights.

With thanks to Charles and Priscilla Scaife and Union College at www.union.edu/PUBLIC/KIDS/index.html
Rhythm plays a fundamental role in juggling. The juggler needs a regular beat to his or her motions. The activity below cannot match the distinctive and much faster rhythm of juggling, but students can work towards matching their movements toward a steady beat.

**Objective:** Students will connect musical beat with catching and tossing a ball.

**Think and share:** Ask students to remember any jugglers they have seen. Ask them to describe the movements of the juggler. What else do they remember most? What kinds of objects have they seen juggled?

**Try it out:**
Adapt this activity according to the age and dexterity of your students. Older students will be able to try more variations. For younger students go more slowly, stay closer, and repeat sections with several pairings of students.

- Begin with two students ready to toss a medium sized rubber ball back and forth.
- Have the rest of the class clap a steady rhythm. (Depending on the age of the students, the teacher may have to lead the claps.)
- Once the clap is established, ask the two students to begin tossing the ball back and forth. Ask them to try to match the rhythm of the clapping. (You may have to adjust the tempo of the clap for the tossing and catching to stay on the beat.) Keeping the claps going, add one more student to join the two and ask them to adjust the timing of their tossing now that there are three catchers.
- Stop the clapping and the tossing and bring up two new students.
- Instead of clapping, the class will now use a few simple songs to provide a beat. (*I’ve Been Working on the Railroad* - with all its tempo changes, *Old MacDonald*, and *Yankee Doodle* work well.)
- Start the passing again with the next two students, and begin adding variations: higher tosses, bounce tosses, more students, and students standing further apart, both evenly and unevenly spaced.
- Ask students to identify the challenges of catching and tossing a ball to a regular beat.
- If you have more balls, ask older students to hold their hands close together and toss a ball back in forth from hand to hand at a regular beat. This will allow them to experience the juggling rhythm much more accurately.

**After the show:** What did students notice about the rhythm of Jamie Adkins’ different kinds of juggling? How many different ways did he juggle? Did his speed of juggling stay the same? Did the music in *Circus Incognitus* affect the juggling? How did the music affect your experience of the show?

Members of the Pickle Family Circus performing the "Big Juggle,” a finale for many of their shows. With thanks to www.juggle.org
ONTON, England (Reuters) -- It’s a great party trick and useful for circus performers but scientists said this week that learning to juggle can cause changes in areas of the adult brain.

Mastering the skill increases the amount of grey matter in areas of the brain that process and store visual information, proving what was not thought possible -- that new stimuli can alter the brain’s structure.

A comparison of brain-imaging scans of non-jugglers and other volunteers before they learned to juggle and three months later, revealed an increase in grey matter in certain areas of the newly trained jugglers’ brains.

“Our results challenge our view of the human central nervous system. Human brains probably must be viewed as dynamic, changing with development and normal learning,” said Arne May, of the University of Regensburg in Germany, who headed the research team.


Note to teachers: There are many things in this performance that students should not attempt, and most they would not try. The only copying you may need to discourage after the performance is the amazing mouth juggling! Jamie Adkins launches and juggles ping-pong balls from his mouth. Mimicking this feat could pose a choking hazard for students.

Resources

Learn to Juggle! Sites on the web:

***Brand new, interactive:  www.easyjuggling.com
http://homepage.mac.com/abramr/juggling/
tutorial/category/
www.juggle.org
learnhowtojuggle.info/
www.thejimshow.com/juggle/
www.kalvan.net/howtojug/howtojug.htm

The New American Circus by Ernest Albrecht
University Press of Florida

Be a Clown by Mark Stolzenberg
Sterling Publishing Co., Inc.

To Reach the Clouds by Philippe Petit
North Point Press

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