Botanica

MOMIX

2010-11
HOT Season for Young People
Teacher Guidebook

Tennessee Performing Arts Center

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# Teacher's Guidebook to
MOMIX's *Botanica*
By Amanda Cantrell Roche

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## A note from our Sponsor ~ Regions Bank

For over 125 years Regions has been proud to be a part of the Middle Tennessee community, growing and thriving as our area has. From the opening of our doors on September 1, 1883, we have committed to this community and our customers.

One area that we are strongly committed to is the education of our students. We are proud to support TPAC’s Humanities Outreach in Tennessee Program. What an important sponsorship this is – reaching over 25,000 students and teachers – some students would never see a performing arts production without this program. Regions continues to reinforce its commitment to the communities it serves and in addition to supporting programs such as HOT, we have close to 200 associates teaching financial literacy in classrooms this year.

**Thank you, teachers,** for giving your students this wonderful opportunity. They will certainly enjoy the experience. You are creating memories of a lifetime, and Regions is proud to be able to help make this opportunity possible.
**Botanica** is an evening-length performance celebrating the earth’s beauty, with imagery of flowers, animals, insects and elemental forces, as well as more abstract interpretations of nature. The student version of the show does not include several segments of the work in its entirety. At times humorous and whimsical and at times breathtakingly beautiful, “Botanica” is a visual delight combining contemporary dance with diverse music, imaginative costuming, props and lighting to transport the audience to a magical world, where nature is animated art.

Although Moses Pendleton is the artistic director and conceiver of choreographic themes and ideas, MOMIX’s creative process is very dancer-centered, and all dancers contribute to the choreography. Pendleton is an avid flower gardener and outdoors enthusiast, with a particular passion for sunflowers. While creating “Botanica,” Pendleton spent hours photographing, filming and walking among his sunflowers. MOMIX dancers would sometimes leave their rehearsal studio, a converted horse barn near Pendleton’s home and property in Connecticut, and dance among the thousands of flowers he grows.

The following excerpt was also an inspiration for *Botanica*:

“The plant strains its whole being in one single plan: to escape above ground from the fatality below: to elude and transgress the dark and weighty law, to free itself, to break the narrow sphere, to invent or invoke wings, to escape as far as possible, to conquer the space wherein fate encloses it, to approach another kingdom, to enter a moving, animated world.”

Maurice Maeterlink, from *The Intelligence of Flowers*, 1907

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**MOMIX**

Based in Connecticut, MOMIX is known internationally for presenting work that blends the beauty and physicality of contemporary dance with surreal imagery and innovative use of the body, props, costuming and lighting. The members are dancers and illusion artists under the direction of Moses Pendleton. MOMIX was created in 1981, shortly after Pendleton choreographed the closing ceremonies of the 1980 Winter Olympics. Prior to that, Pendleton was a founding member of the ground-breaking and renowned Pilobolus Dance Company.

For nearly three decades, MOMIX has been entertaining and awing audiences around the world with accessible, theatrical dance in multi-media productions. Their performances incorporate humor and illusion with the artistry and the stunning physicality of modern dance. The company tours extensively with live shows as well as performing in films, on television and for special projects. Their work has often been called “a spectacle,” and they are one of the few for-profit dance companies in the United States.
**BOTANICA**  
*Program Description*  
*Selections for Student Audiences*

**Blacklight** 8:26  
This portion highlights MOMIX’s skill at illusion, as various body parts sheathed in glow-in-the-dark fabric are used to create images of plants, animals, people and shapes that transform and float in midair, defy gravity, time and space.

**Sandpiper** 0:30  
A transitionary segment in which a dancer, with only legs showing under a leaf-like costume, moves with brisk yet delicate precision across the stage.

**Marigolds** 5:27  
An example of the company’s use of props, in this portion the dancers’ tu-tuesque costumes continually change, moving down their bodies from head to toes. The dance has a balletic quality in the dancers’ formations and footwork, yet is set to contemporary music.

**Hornets** 3:35  
A quartet of male dancers with movement that is sharp and quick, reflecting the frenetic movement of flying insects, often in unison.

**Suffis/Owl** 1:16  
A transitionary segment of owl and bird noises, accompanied by tiny, flickering lights that move around the stage like fireflies.

**Centaurs** 4:36  
Pairs of dancers work together to create one creature with two human bodies. This piece explores animal characteristics and behavior, and highlights the dancers’ considerable physicality.

**Storm** 5:30  
Sailing fabric, lighting, music, sound effects and choreography blend to bring to the stage the power and ominous beauty of weather.

**Bird** 1:37  
Two dancers, each wearing one roller blade skate, capture the sound and soaring movement of tropical birds in this short piece.

**Sunflower Fans** 4:29  
Giant feathered, half-circle fans help to transform four dancers into sunflowers which twirl, dance together and individually, quiver and eventually succumb to wilting.

**Man Fan** 5:55  
A particularly innovative and wondrous use of a prop as a solo dancer manipulates a huge piece of fabric that seems to have life and breath of its own. Images of nature are projected on the fabric as it rises and falls to ethereal music.

**Solar Flares** 4:38  
This upbeat dance utilizes noodle-like props and rhythmic choreography to explore the energy of solar flares.  
A STROBE LIGHT IS USED BRIEFLY IN THIS PORTION
**Art Bites**

**Introducing Botanica in the Classroom**

*Activities in 20 minutes or less*

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**Buzzing and Herding**

*Grades 3-6*

Two parts of “Botanica” – “Hornets” and “Centaurs” – portray social characteristics of insects or animals and include movement in unison.

Ask students to think about insects that move as a group (bees buzzing around a hive, ants walking in a line). Ask students what a herd is, and what kinds of animals move in a herd.

**Activity:** In an open space, divide class into small groups, with four to five students per group. Ask them to stand close together but not touching, and walk throughout the room, trying to move exactly the same way at exactly the same time. You may want to start with having each group walk from one side of the room to the other. As they master this, encourage them to increase their speed. Assign leaders if necessary, and invite students to start changing direction – moving sideways, turning slowly, changing levels. Tell students that in dance, when all the dancers are moving exactly the same way at the same time, it is called moving in **unison**. Assign each group a particular insect or animal to be from the suggestions made at the beginning of the lesson, or allow each group to choose their own. This should be a type of insect or animal that sometimes moves as a group all at the same time. Invite students to explore some different ways those animals or insects could move individually, as well as in unison. Close with a reflection on what they learned of animal behavior during this activity, and what they learned about moving in unison.

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**Creating Animals**

*Using body parts and whole body*

*Grades 3-6*

In the first portion of “Botanica,” dancers use isolated body parts to create multiple types of animals, including a human form made with four arms, as well as shapes. Other portions use the dancers’ entire body to portray insects, and in one dance pairs of dancers work together to create a Centaur.

**Activity:** In the spirit of shadow play, ask students to create a bird with their hands, and then make it move. (You don’t have to use shadows but it would make it more engaging). Invite students to try a different way to create a bird with hands. Using a hand and an arm, create a snake and make it move. What other animals can you create with your hands and arms? Sitting in a chair, try creating an animal with two arms and one leg from the knee down. How much can you make this animal move?

Standing, create birds, snakes or other animals using the entire body. A good way to initiate this is to begin with a pose or statue, and then add movement. How does this feel different from just using parts of the body? What are the advantages to each approach?

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**Touchstones in Botanica**

Life cycle • Weather • Interdependence/ecosystems • Symmetry and asymmetry • Non-verbal communication and narrative • Centrifugal force • Abstraction and realism
Centrifugal Force and Flow

**Grades 5 and up**

**Materials:** one cord or heavy-weight string approximately 18” in length per student

Have students experiment with holding a piece of cord or string (perhaps even cord of student ID lanyards) and spinning it with their hand. Experiment with different speeds. What happens when speed is increased? Create weight at the end of the string by tying a knot in the string and experiment with how that affects the way it spins. Tie knots at equal distances all up the cord and spin again, and feel the difference. Ask students to change the level of the cord, so that while it is spinning, it is also moving up and down. Invite students to imagine a circular curtain of beads attached to a prop worn on the head. The beads are swung by turning the entire body. They will see something similar in the segment “Beadskirt,” which demonstrates not only how centrifugal force can be used to manipulate a prop, but the uncanny ability of a dancer to spin rapidly in one direction for an entire dance. To encourage empathy with this skill, have students turn in one direction for approximately 10 seconds and notice what sensations they feel.

Life cycle of a flower

**Grades 3-4**

Discuss the stages in the life cycle of a flower, and ask students to close their eyes and picture a flower blooming and wilting in fast motion.

**Activity:** Seated in chairs pushed away from desks or on the floor in a large circle, ask students to explore movement in which they make the tightest, most compact ball with their bodies as possible, and then open to the widest shape they can make. Invite them to try this several times, exploring different ways to do it each time. In dance, this is called core-distal movement, moving from the core of your body (torso) to the most distant points (fingers, toes), and then reverse.

Ask students how this might relate to a flower’s life cycle.Invite them to think about a particular flower blooming, and then wilting, and using core-distal movement, create a short movement phrase that shows the life cycle of a flower.

Photo: Don Perdue
Before the Performance

Notice basic elements of dance in the performance:

- **Watch** for ways in which the dancers move **individually**, as well as in **pairs, trios** or in **groups**.
- See how they use **levels** – low, medium and high – in their body positioning.
- Pay attention to **speed**. In which parts are dancers moving slowly, or quickly? How does it look when they combine different speeds?
- What kind of **shapes** are the dancers making? Are the lines of their bodies curved, straight, bent at angles?
- What types of **force** or **energy** are the dancers using? Are their movements soft, smooth, strong, sharp, etc.?

After the Performance

Discussion Questions and Reflection:

- In what ways did “Botanica” represent **nature**, or in other words, look like something you could easily recognize? What parts looked less like something you could recognize? Talk about realism and abstraction in art.
- In what parts did you see evidence of the **life cycle**? (Marigolds, Sunflowers, Hornets). Describe these life cycles.
- How was lighting and **color** used effectively in the dances?
- In some dances, such as “Hornets,” **props** were used in the beginning (as the dancers spun yellow and black poles as wings) but then were discarded. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of dancing with props?
- What parts of nature were represented? What would you have included or omitted if **you were the choreographer**?
- Consider the prop in “Man Fan,” and the way the fabric was spread out above the dancer and seemed to **float in midair**, stretched out, and then fall in folds. How do you think this effect was achieved? Consider if when you were watching the dance if you thought more about how the effect was achieved or were taken up with the whole experience.

Contemplating Further...

**For Writing or Discussion**

- What is a centaur? At what time period did the idea of the centaur originate? Where can centaurs be found in modern literature?
- What is a solar flare? What causes solar flares and what effects might they have on the earth? What are the different types of solar flares?
- Research the life cycle of a hornet. How would you describe the behavior of the worker hornets? How might this be expressed in dance?
- What is contemporary dance? From what kind of dance did it evolve? How is it different from ballet? How is it different from hip hop?

What is Modern and Contemporary Dance?

The style of dance that MOMIX performs is often called “modern” or “contemporary.” Although there is no universally accepted definition of **modern dance**, it generally refers to a style of dance movement that developed in the early 1900s in the United States as a rebellion against the strict positioning and classicism of ballet. Modern dance allowed a much broader range of motion than ballet or folk dance, and was more abstract than the narrative form of ballet. Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Dennis are considered two of the founders of modern dance, followed by other dancers and choreographers who developed specific dance techniques for training and choreography, such as Martha Graham, José Limón, Doris Humphrey, Katherine Dunham and Lester Horton. **Contemporary dance** is a term that has an even broader scope than modern. It is often used to refer to performance dance that has foundations in modern dance, but is inspired by current issues and themes, and not necessarily rooted in a specific modern technique.
Exploring Nature’s Power and Beauty through Movement

Grades 3 and up


Space: an open space is required – a classroom will work if desks and chairs are pushed to the perimeter of the room.

Reflection/Group Discussion
What are some examples of nature’s beauty?
What are some examples of nature’s power?
In what ways do we celebrate and honor that?
What if we could honor the beauty, the essence of animals, insects, plants and weather through dance?
This is what “Botanica” aspires to do.

Warm up
Flocking/follow the leader game:
Divide class into two or three groups. Each group stands in a clump facing forward, with a little space to move without bumping into each other. Choose one leader for each group. The leaders make movements with arms and torso standing in place, and the rest of the group has to follow as closely as possible so that everyone is moving in unison. Remind students that in order to do this, movement must be SLOW and the leader has to always be looking forward. Leaders can change either by teacher instruction to do so, or older students may be able to turn, with the leader becoming the person in the side or back (now the front of the clump) whom they can all see.

Five count circle game:
Have students stand in a large circle, facing in. Students are told something for which they will make a full body pose, for example, a tree. To do this, walk five small steps in a circle around oneself, and on five hit and hold the pose. The teacher should demonstrate, and count aloud every time. It works best when everyone does it at the same time.

Using the five count circle, make these poses:
- 1st pose: Tree. Ask students to try to hold their pose but look around at others. Then, trying to keep a similar body pose, silently work with two or three people nearby to form one tree with all of the bodies.
- 2nd pose: Dragonfly. Think about its lines. Make pose first with five count circle. Hold pose, think about its flight patters – how it may land or move through the air. Make that pose move. Use levels – high, medium and low.
- 3rd pose: Tornado – pose first, then add movement. Encourage use of levels in movement, i.e., moving from high to low.
- 4th pose: Giraffe -- pose individually first. Then turn to one other person and quickly see how you can use your two bodies to make one giraffe.

Activity
Divide class into four groups. Each group will be assigned a plant, animal, insect or elemental force to portray through poses and movement. Each instruction includes what each group is portraying, basic instructions on how to do that, a challenge, and suggestions for expanding if time allows.

Give instructions in written format to groups (see group instructions on next page).

Expand: Consider how to use as much space as possible in movement.

Sharing and Reflection
Have each group share what they came up with for the rest of the class. Ask students what they notice about the movement, and what they think the challenge might have been. Note that they will see examples of this in “Botanica,” except that instead of horses, the dancers will be Centaurs, a mythical creature with a human head and torso and the legs and body of a horse.
Copy & cut these instructions for each small group.

**Sunflower**

- Create a short dance phrase about this flower.
- Challenge: create poses of the flowers individually (so there will be as many flowers as there are performing members of the group) as well as one large flower created with all of the performers together.
- Expand: Consider the personality of sunflowers. How might they move if they could dance? Experiment with movement you can do individually and in transition from being many flowers and becoming one large flower.
- Materials: colored tissue paper or pieces of light-weight fabric – this may be used as hand props or costuming.

**Horse**

- Create a short dance phrase that captures the power and grace of a horse.
- You can start off with creating a pose and then decide how that animal might move.
- Challenge: Each horse must be created with two people (two human bodies make one horse)
- Expand: Horses are herd animals. How might they move in a herd or group? What kind of social interaction might they exhibit? What are their needs? Fears? Joys?

**Wasps**

- Create individual poses and then movement that captures the essence of wasps.
- Challenge: Movement should be in unison – all performers moving the same way at the same time – as in a swarm of wasps.
- Expand: How might changes of direction be used? How can you vary your speed?

**Storm**

- Create a short dance that shows the power and beauty of a thunderstorm.
- Challenge: Use levels – high, medium and low – for different parts. Include rain, wind and lightening.
Creating Nature Tribute Poems
Language Arts, Grades 3-6:

Preparation/Materials:
• paper and pencil
• Brainstorm a list of adverbs as a group or individually that describe dance or movement
• Brainstorm a list of flowers. Have each student choose a flower that they can envision clearly.

Warm Up:
Timed free write on that flower, trying to focus on describing it in as great detail as possible. The idea behind freewriting is to never stop writing, even if you get off topic or don’t know what to write – just don’t let the pencil stop. Suggested time for freewrite: 3-4 minutes. Another option might be creating a free association mind map.

Activity:
Ask students to imagine that a flower can move, even dance. Individually, have students create a list of adverbs that describe ways the flower might move. Using one of the formats below or any you choose, have students create a short poem that describes the flower.

Sensory poem:
Example:
A (flower name) moves like__________
It looks like __________
It feels like __________
It sounds like __________
It dances like __________

Cinquain (five line poem with specific number of words for each line):
Example:
Sunflower (one word)
Giant blossom (two words)
Follows the sun (three words)
Turning slowly (two words)
Sunflower (one word)

This also can be done with other themes explored in “Botancia,” such as storm, insects or animals, as well as other poetry formats such as the Haiku.

To expand the activity:
Have students close their eyes and envision what it would look like if a dancer had to portray the flower, insect, animal or storm that they wrote about. Then ask them to stand and create a full-body pose that represents the subject of their poem (The five-step circle, in which students walk in a small circle around themselves and on five create the pose, is a great way to get everyone to jump in). After holding for a moment and noticing the different interpretations, ask students to make their pose move. You can encourage different types of movement by calling out adverbs from the group brainstorming and inviting students to move in that manner.
Exploring Point of View from Natural Elements or Living Things
Language Arts, Grades 7 and up

Materials:
Paper and pencil. Sketch paper and colored pencils for expanded portion

Reflection:
As a group ask students to consider what is beautiful or powerful about these groups of things. Use descriptive language:
Thunderstorm
Flowers
Animals
Insects
Landscape

Activity:
Have students individually choose one group with which to work, and give them a moment to close their eyes and picture a specific type of storm, flower, animal, insect or landscape in their head. From the point of view of that storm, landscape, insect, animal or flower, write a letter to humans describing yourself. Consider what type of personality you would have, and what your tone of voice would sound like. What would you tell humans about your life? Describe what is powerful and beautiful about you. Describe how you move, how you would dance. If you had a soundtrack for yourself, what would it be, what would it sound like? What colors best represent you?
Ask for volunteers to read letters aloud, ideally with one from each grouping represented. Discuss the differences you hear in personality, in description. Tell students that MOMIX does something similar, but instead of using words, they use dance, lighting, music and visuals to pay tribute to these wondrous aspects of nature.

To expand the activity:
Imagine the storm, landscape, flower, animal or insect you wrote about had to be portrayed by a human, as in a play or dance performance. What kind of costuming or props would you use? What colors would you use? What kind of stage lighting would help the audience understand what you are trying to say? (i.e., colorful, bright, dim, spotlights, or a “wash” that covers the whole stage). Create a sketch that shows the costuming, props and lighting as well as a human portraying your storm, landscape, flower, animal or insect.
For The High School Dance Teacher, Lesson Seeds

Props
Discuss with dancers the use of props in modern dance, and the balance between using a prop effectively and allowing it to take away from the impact of or completely overshadow the movement.

Have “stations” set up in the studio with different props at each one. Some ideas for props: hula hoops, pieces of flowing fabric, pool noodles, colored tissue paper and paper plates, etc. Allow students to explore different ways of moving with the props, without allowing the prop to completely dominate or inhibit their movement.

After students have had a chance to experience different props, invite them to choose something inspirational from nature they would like to represent through dance. Allow usage of one to two props in creating a short dance phrase as tribute to their chosen natural inspiration, and consider having students who are portraying the same thing work in small groups.

Incorporating specific elements of dance composition could be suggested to give more focus.

Lighting Design and Multi-Media
Discuss the different possibilities of lighting and projection in dance. Using a contemporary dance the students have learned or one they create themselves, have students consider what type of lighting and/or projection would be effective and captivating, as well as adding to the meaning or message of the dance. Depending on time and the students’ knowledge of lighting design, they may be able to write lighting instructions for a dance, create a lighting plot, or create a sketch or digital image showing lighting and multi-media effects.

Body
MOMIX is known for using bodies in innovative ways. Invite students to try this, exploring creating animals with two or more bodies, and making them dance. Have students explore ways of creating images of flowers individually, and then in small groups. Use isolated body parts to create images of nature that move and dance.
Resources

MOMIX website:  www.mosespendleton.com

Interview with Moses Pendleton on the company and “Botanica”: http://houstondance.org/DSH/Site_Page.cfm?PageID=498&HeaderID=70

Smithsonian’s Spotlight on Modern Dance: http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/spotlight/dance.html