

Solstice Celebrations

Written by Christopher McLeod

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Produced by Salamander Theatre for Young Audiences

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Teacher Kit: Solstice Celebrations

Curriculum Goals:

- Drama** To understand a narrative sequence
 To create a play from a story
 To develop characters
 To write a script
- Language Arts** To understand the difference between first person story telling and
 third person narration
 To use first person narration as a writer or a speaker
- Canadian Heritage** To appreciate a diversity of cultural stories

Background and follow-up activities

The stories you saw were:

- “St. George and the Dragon” (adapted from an English Mummers Play)
- “The Rabbi and the Coachman” (Central Europe)
- “Amaterasu” (a Shinto story from Japan)
- “Befana” (from Italy)
- “Krishna and Naraka” (a Hindu story from India)
- “Anansi, Monkey and Tiger” (a Caribbean story for North American Kwanzaa)

Which of the stories had members of the class heard before? Which was your favourite story? Is it your favourite because of plot, character, or style of presentation (i.e. masks, shadow puppets, or audience involvement)?

How are the stories similar?

Do members of the class know any other stories that include characters in the play?

Do these stories tell us anything about the places they come from or the people who tell them?

Director's Note

Solstice Celebrations is intended to affirm the diversity of Canada while exploring similarities in the stories of disparate global cultures. The various festivals of light, that so often emphasize the near universal theme of the light vs. darkness, presented an excellent opportunity to fulfil this purpose. Since so many of these festivals are celebrated near the winter solstice, I elected to present our creation seasonally, although I realise that I am rather stretching the season of Diwali and slightly anticipating Kwanzaa. Conspicuous by its absence in this collection is Islam. This omission occurred because of the purely lunar nature of the Islamic calendar which prevents associating any of the Islamic holy days with a solar pattern and none of their traditions that I am aware of emphasize the symbol of light. Certainly no offence is intended by the omission.

Notes on the stories

St. George and the Dragon:

Mumming is a tradition in England that predates Christianity. The original identity of St. George is a matter of great academic speculation. Where the tradition survives, groups of people (usually more than the three in our adaptation) in masks and costumes go door to door at midwinter performing plays and in return being rewarded with cookies, cakes and other holiday delicacies. There is a form of mumming still practiced in Newfoundland today, but it mostly involves disguised musicians and pranksters with no fixed scenarios. We begin our version with Deck the Halls, a well known carol which, like mumming, dates back to pagan times.

The Rabbi and the Coachman:

Storytelling is a big part of the celebration at Hanukkah. Our play contains elements of two Jewish folktales gleaned from books of Hanukkah tales from the Ottawa Public Library. I liked it because it highlights a friendship between two people of differing faiths and downplays the difference between the servant classes and the more affluent. Light the Candles is a song that one of our actors remembered from his days in a public school choir.

Amaterasu:

The story of the kame of the sun I found most abundantly on the Internet, some of the versions containing quite adult-oriented details, others designed specifically for children. It is interesting to contrast a feminine sun with the Greco-Roman traditions of the west. I collected the song, So Shun Fu, from a Japanese woman now living in Ottawa. The form of Japanese the song is written in is so old that she could not tell me exactly what is being said, but it remains a popular song and contains images of snow falling through the cherry blossoms.

Befana:

There are several versions of the Befana story available in children's books. It is not known whether or not Dickens was familiar with the Befana tale, but she certainly predates his character Scrooge, or Seuss' Grinch, both famous grouches likewise reformed by the Christmas spirit. Sadly, the story of Befana is under pressure even in Italy from Santa Claus due to the pervasive influence of North American media. The song, Tu Scendi Dalle Stelle, is especially popular with Italian children's choirs.

Krishna and Naraka:

Divali (or Diwali) is celebrated by almost all Hindus with fireworks and coloured lights. The practice of Hinduism varies greatly from region to region in India and, as a result, amongst the Hindu diaspora. The festival is celebrated in late autumn, not really at solstice, but the theme of light triumphing over darkness is always very strong. The story of Krishna and Naraka is not the one most Hindus associate with Divali, but it is one of the most dramatic and echoes so strongly the story of George and the Dragon that I had to use it. The idea for the coloured shadow puppets came from India as well. Traditionally, touring performers would make similar puppets by stretching and pounding goatskin to a translucent thinness and then tinting them with ink. This tradition is quickly being replaced by touring cinema. We made our puppets by laminating the tinted plastic used for theatre lights. The song to Ram was taught to me by a member of our Shakespeare Young Company now studying theatre at York University. Ram is an incarnation of Krishna and the figure associated with Divali by the majority of Hindus.

Anansi, Monkey and Tiger:

Stories of Anansi are popular in West Africa as well as the Caribbean. I adapted this one to include specific references to Kwanzaa, a holiday based on African first fruits celebrations adapted by African Americans as a part of the civil rights movement. This holiday is observed in the seven days between December 25th and January 1st and each day a new candle is lit and one of the seven themes is examined. Sharing stories is a big part of the festivities.

Activities:

Salamander Theatre has used versions of the following activities with classes from grades 1 – 6. Primary classes may do best with step 2. Below each member of the group draws one frame of the storyboard. If the teacher is most interested in the Language Arts objectives, step 4 may be omitted. If the focus is Dramatic Arts, step 5 can be omitted and step 6 used as an exercise for individual actors.

1. Tell your favourite story from beginning to end in the third person. If working in groups, tell the story sitting in a circle with each person saying a sentence at a time.
2. A) From your favourite story, can you pick the most exciting moment? Draw a picture of it, or working in groups of 4 and 5 make a tableau (an arrangement of statues) using your own bodies. Make this freeze frame as clear and as interesting as possible.
B) How does the story end? Create an image for this too.
C) Create an image that tells us what we need to know to get to the image from A) above.
3. Write a cartoon speech bubble for each of the characters in the pictures you drew, or let your statue/actors tell you what their character is thinking/feeling/saying in each tableau. Turn some of these ideas into lines and select the order in which these lines should be delivered.
4. Tell your story again using what you found out. How has it changed?
5. Tell your story again in the first person from the point of view of a particular character. How is it different?