



TREEHOUSE SHAKERS

COYOTE'S DANCE: TALES FROM THE AMERICAN INDIAN



STUDY GUIDE

" Our children need nurturing good stories. Awareness of the existence of indigenous cultures of the American West, rich with oral tradition based on respect for our interdependence with the natural world, is extremely helpful to our children who often live removed from direct knowledge of ancestors and nature and diversity. In the traditional world, stories such as these tales would have more specific cultural, and often secret meanings shared among a People. However, their inherent wisdom, humor, compassion and fundamental teachings are relevant to everyone; because wisdom is based on insight and appreciation. I am so moved by the gathering of these tales, adapted respectfully from four native sources that make up **Coyote's Dance**. I am so moved by the generosity of traditional peoples who share what they can of their culture for the benefit of all children. My hope is that as many children as possible experience the joy and meaning of this wonderful theater event. In these deeply troubling times we need to expose our children to dynamic experiences of happiness, diversity and hope.

*-Laura Simms, Storyteller, Author, Humanitarian
www.laurasimms.com*

ABOUT THE STORIES

BY MARA MCEWIN



Having grown up in Wyoming, and eventually living in New Mexico, I observed coyotes countless times. I loved seeing them in the wild. They are often viewed as a feared menace amongst ranchers and as often, they are revered in Native stories as a shape shifting sacred trickster. Coyote is the only animal in North America who continues to adjust to the ever-growing human population. They reach new territories using their intelligent minds; surviving on meals from all links on the food chain. Coyote, the animal, is not that different than his story depiction. Tale after tale, Coyote adjusts to circumstances with uncanny response and his wiles. In Native cultures Coyote is a great teacher, a clown, and notorious trickster. His adventures instruct, inform and

warn us human beings about our foibles and brilliance. The tales of Coyote are profound and sometimes wildly funny.

The tales in Coyote's Dance are retellings of adapted versions still shared by the Pima, Cheyenne, Okanogan and Shuswap tribes. Some of the sources I found were in American Indian Myths and Legends by Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz. They were carefully crafted and retold for all audiences, native and non-native. Inspired, I went on to discover as much about Coyote, the animal and the mythic creatures, that I could feast upon. I crafted the essence of four stories into theatrical pieces. I chose what felt universal and also redolent with Native knowledge. I hope that their spirit, wisdom and compassion remain true to the oral flow of shared language that has kept them alive and significant for a very long time. After working on Coyote's Dance, I have become a great believer in the mischief and magic of Coyote. Children everywhere love these tales.

THE PERFORMANCE



Coyote's Dance

Retold By Mara McEwin

Choreographed By Emily Bunning

Original By Music Roderick L. Jackson & Ulali

An original performance told through modern dance, music and theater!

Join Treehouse Shakers with their original dance-play, **Coyote's Dance**, retold by Mara McEwin, choreographed by Emily Bunning and music by award winning musicians Roderick Jackson and the First Women's Nation a cappella group, Ulali. **Coyote's Dance** leads audiences into the remarkable world of Coyote, the infamous mischief-maker from Native American cultures. Follow Coyote as he humorously tries to turn himself blue with the help of a songbird, outwit a sly and handsome Fox for his eagle feathered-robe and dances with the mesmerizing stars in the universe. The set, compiled of several trampolines, keeps audiences thoroughly awe-struck as Coyote and friends fly, jump and

dance through the air. The engaging contemporary dance, live music and beautiful costumes will have even the youngest of audience members dancing and laughing in their seats.

Coyote's Dance is geared to be immediately digestible by younger children, but has enough cleverness and wit to win over audiences of all ages.

BEFORE SEEING THE PERFORMANCE

1. Show students a map of North America. Discuss the different Indian nations whose stories are represented in **Coyote's Dance**. These nations and stories include:
 - ❑ **Okanagan** "The Creation of the Animal People"
 - ❑ **Pima** "Bluebird and Coyote"
 - ❑ **Shuswap** "Coyote and Fox"
 - ❑ **Cheyenne** "Coyote Dances with a Star"
2. Talk about these different nations and where each one is from and what their tribe is best known for: weaving, agriculture, pottery, etc.
 - ❑ **Okanogan**, hunters, fisherman and gatherers. Were once scattered over Idaho, western Oregon, and eastern Washington. Most descendants now live on the Colville Reservation in Washington.
 - ❑ **Pima** are thought to be descendants of the ancient Hohokam-*Those Who Have Gone Before*-and the prehistoric makers of the irrigation canal. Most Pima along with the community of the Maricopa live on the Gila River reservation in Arizona.
 - ❑ **Shuswap**, A tribe of Salishan linguistic stock, the most important of that group in British Columbia. On the south they bordered upon the Okanagan; on the west, the Lillooet; on the north, the Chilcotin; and on the east extended to the main divide of the Rocky Mountains. They are now gathered upon a number of small reservations attached to the Kamloops-Okanagan and Williams Lake agencies.
 - ❑ **Cheyenne**, The Cheyenne call themselves "The people" or "Tis-Tsis-Tas". Lived in tipis and were buffalo hunters. Today mostly live on The Lane deer Reservations in Montana and the southern Cheyenne remained in Oklahoma.
** The above information in #2 was helpfully borrowed from the book, "American Indian Myths and Legends" selected and edited by Eroles & Ortiz.*
3. You can read other stories of Coyote, from many Native American nations that were not included in **Coyote's Dance**, but are very important stories. Throughout all of these stories Coyote is sometimes a creator, sometimes a trickster and sometimes a clown. Discuss what each of these roles means and how did Coyote become all these things. Why do you think Coyote has so many of his own stories?
4. Coyote is typically known as a trickster type character. What other characters from stories you know are tricksters?
5. Show students photographs or realistic drawings of the animals from **Coyote's Dance** such as the eagle, fox, coyote, bluebird and magpies.

6. In **Coyote's Dance** these animals can speak. What other stories do they know in which animal characters can talk and do other "human" things?
7. Talk about Native American Dance. It is often used in rituals and celebrations both exploring joy and grief. These dances portray the intimate connection of humans and nature/animals through stories and movements. Drumming is used to keep the beat of the song and dance. Watch Native American dance in tribal settings, encourage the students to look for similarities from these movements to those they will see in **Coyote's Dance**?
8. Talk about Modern Dance. Treehouse Shakers' Choreographer, Emily Bunning used modern dance with elements of Native movement to choreograph **Coyote's Dance**. Modern Dance is the combination and freedom of creativity/inventiveness; movement including energy, shape, space, locomotion; and rhythm (reoccurring sound or action). Modern dance is a way for the body to express ideas and emotions. It is often practiced with bare feet so the dancer has a full range of foot movement and can be grounded to the floor.
9. What are other types of dance; ballet, tap, jazz, social/ballroom, hip-hop, and break-dancing. Talk about the history of Modern Dance. It is an art form that developed in the United States and Germany in the early 1900s. It arose as a rebellion to classical ballet and a new way to expression. You could bring in pictures of famous Modern dancers; Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Twyla Tharp, Alvin Ailey, and Merce Cunningham.

AFTER SEEING THE PERFORMANCE

1. After seeing **Coyote's Dance**, discuss it with your class. Who was their favorite character and why? Did they notice which actors and dancers played more than one part? How did the costumes help to make the actors and dancers look like animals or stars? How did the actors' and or dancers' movements and voices make you think they were animals or stars?
2. Talk about tricksters in stories and that tricksters are in all stories from all over the world. Coyote was the trickster in **Coyote's Dance**. What characteristics made him a trickster?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Have students create their own trickster tales. You can have them sit in a circle and each make up a part to the story. It's okay if the story doesn't make sense; just encourage students to use their creativity.
2. Have children create their own Coyote story. They could create this together as a group or as individuals. They could write their stories down, tell the stories out loud, draw their stories or put on a play based on their stories.
3. Act out a story from the Native peoples. Research your own Native American story and have students create a play of their own. They can make their own sets, and costumes. You can have many students play the same part if more than one wants to act out a role. This could be a long project or even a half-hour project. Tell the story to the students and then have them act it out around the classroom.
4. Ask your students to imitate the body movements of different animals. After they have mastered their animal movements, have them add sounds, or even

abstract dance. What happens when two or more of the "animals" meet each other? You can take this exercise further by creating masks to further enhance the animal characters.

5. Talk about the role of a choreographer in **Coyote's Dance**. This is the person who makes up the gestures and movements and puts them together in space. Students can practice being a choreographer by dividing into groups and having a leader who makes four to eight movements and teaches them to their group. One way to begin is to use their name. Write the name in space with a finger, one hand, both hands, just with the head or with a knee. Teachers, ask different students to use different body parts they can even write it backwards.
6. Have a pow-wow of your own. Invite students to study different Native Nations and bring in things to share about their learned experiences; a story, a food dish, something craft that is made. You can also dance, play Native music and celebrate. Or, go one step further and take your class to a real pow-wow. Have students experience the cultural foods, music and dance for themselves.

HISTORY

Treehouse Shakers Inc., a not for profit dance and theater company, is committed to creating original dance-plays. Treehouse Shakers was co-founded in 1997 by collaborators and lifetime friends Emily Bunning, Artistic Coordinator/choreographer/dancer and Mara McEwin, Artistic Director/writer/actor. All of our original dance-plays have been written by McEwin and choreographed by Bunning and embrace the co-founders' needs to respond, examine and explore societal cultures, perceptions and ideas.

Treehouse Shakers has created and performed eleven original dance-plays for both young and adult audiences in many established performance venues, as well as schools, theaters, festivals and community centers across the nation. Treehouse Shakers' dance-plays blend dance with a fully realized theatrical script and the multi-disciplinary elements of visual and audio arts. Treehouse Shakers is committed to creating work that encourages people of all ages to experience their feelings and their connection to the greater community. Treehouse Shakers achieves this by experimenting with imaginative parallel narratives, dialogue, spoken word, and exploring the story's components through the abstractions of modern dance. Treehouse Shakers was named for the wonders of nature, the power of imagination and the excitement of dance. The tree house, like the theater, is a sacred space where imagination is the most potent currency and stories are the roots of the world.

Treehouse Shakers currently has several original dance-plays for young audiences on a rotating tour across the nation including: **Animal Rhythms: Two African Folktales**, **Desert Travels: Tales From the Middle East**, **Coyote's Dance: Tales from the American Indian**. In April 2009 **Let's Talk About IT!**, a piece for teens, joined the repertoire. **Animal Rhythms** introduces audiences to rhythm, modern dance and theater through the power and culture of West African folklore. **Desert Travels** gives young audiences a mesmerizing taste of life in the Middle East by portraying the sights, sounds and stories of a remarkable and distinguished culture. **Coyote's Dance** follows Coyote, who is both clown and teacher, on a humorous journey of deceit and adventure. **Let's Talk About IT!**, Treehouse Shakers' newest original dance-play, is a coming of age performance exploration, for teens which premiered on tour to Southwest Wyoming in

April 2009. **Let's Talk About IT!** incorporates the vocabulary of dance, ancient world folklore, real-life stories, and video interviews of everyday teens and pre-teens.

Treehouse Shakers' Seedling Drama, ages 0-6, **Hatched** is the original performance of a newborn chick that emerges from his shell at sunrise to a strange and busy world. Performed through movement, handcrafted puppets, and very little human dialogue, the story is set amidst an American family farm. Part touch museum, farm, and a full theatrical experience, **Hatched** is sure to please even the youngest of audience members. Our newest piece, **Under the Tangle**, for ages 8 +, is the dance-mystery about an adolescent girl who becomes ensnarled in a labyrinth after the sudden loss of her parents. Throughout her journey, she confronts numerous obstacles, finding clues, which reveal insightful life lessons, which help eventually set her free from the labyrinth.

Treehouse Shakers' young audience work has been praised by Laurel Graeber in the *New York Times*, and featured in *New York Magazine*, *Time Out Kids*, *New York 1's Parenting Report*, *CBS-TV's Morning Show*, *Mommy Poppins*, *Village Voice*, *New York Post*, and *The Daily News*, among others. Our young audience work has received funding from the New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, Edith Lutyens and Norman Bel Geddes Fund, Lower Manhattan Cultural Community's Fund for Creative Communities and Manhattan Community Arts Fund, The Nancy Quinn Fund, Puffin Foundation, Ltd., Meet the Composers, BOCES, Rosenthal Family Foundation and the Wyoming Arts Council. Some highlighted performance venues for all of our dance-plays include: *United Nations (NYC)*, *The Peter Jay Sharp Theater (NYC)*, *The Ailey Citigroup Theater (NYC)*, *BAM's Hillman Studio (NYC)*, *Manhattan Movement and Arts Center (NYC)*, *Victoria Theater Associations (Dayton, OH)*, *Alden Theater (McLean, VA)*, *Aronoff Center (Cincinnati, OH)*, *Paramount Theater (Peekskill, NY)*, *Westhampton Beach Playhouse (L.I., NY)*, *Tribeca Film Festival (NYC)*, and *Jacob's Pillow's Community Day (Becket, MA)*, *Two Rivers Theater (Red Bank, NJ)*, *Black Rock Theater (Germantown, MD)*, *Bucks County Playhouse (New Hope, PA)*.

We'd love to hear from you! Please let us know what you thought of **Coyote's Dance**. Send comments, drawings and evaluations to: Treehouse Shakers, Radio City Station, P.O. Box 186, New York, NY 10101-0186 or visit us online at www.treehouseshakers.com.

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