

DAVID PRATHER

The World of Myths

Art Form: Theatre/Storytelling

Style: Contemporary

Culture: American/European

MEET THE ARTIST:

David Prather is a talented and charismatic actor who has two decades of experience working with young audiences. His performance style employs a blend of stand-up comedy, improvisation and audience interaction. He has been on the Music Center Education roster for many years as a workshop and residency artist and as a performer of his solo assemblies, *The World of Myths* and Prather's Poetry Jam. He has hosted the popular Open House at the Hollywood Bowl since 1997. Also a writer, Mr. Prather's play "John and Juan" has been presented by the Tony-award winning Alley Theater in Texas, as well as at the Gene Autry Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Los Angeles appearances include roles at the Los Angeles Theatre Center and two seasons with the Mark Taper Forum Repertory Company. Television audiences may know him as the young Ward Cleaver on "The New Leave It To Beaver." Mr. Prather is a graduate of Princeton University and the American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

In The World of Myths, David Prather tells tales based on ancient legends and stories from different civilizations of times past. The program is designed to encourage students to use their imaginations, to wonder, and to ask questions about the world around them as well as about space and its celestial bodies. Myths and stories from several countries and cultures are selected from the following repertoire: China - "Panku;" Guatemala - "The Corn People;" Germany - "The Four Cobblers;" India - "Where Did People Come From?" and "Ganesha's Fight with the Moon;" Native American - "Why Do the Leaves Turn Colors?" and from New Guinea - "Where Do the Stars Come From?"



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Long, long ago there was no earth, no sun, no moon. No stars shone in the heavens. There was only the darkness of space. From that time to this, the overwhelming question for mankind has always been, "How did all this come to be?"

People have always asked questions about the world around them, about the sun, moon, and stars in the sky, and themselves. Before there were scientists, teachers, libraries or schools to help, people had to create their own answers to their questions. Looking carefully, listening intently, and using their imaginations, early people created answers in the form of beautiful stories. These stories are called myths.

The creation of myths provided mankind with a way of explaining a world full of sometimes threatening phenomena. Thunder and lightning, the sea, earthquakes, clouds, the sun, moon and stars -- all were given human qualities, or were said to be ruled by gods with human sensibilities. Through ritual, the acting out of myth, men felt they could placate the gods and gain power over the elements. Hence, myth became an important and essential part of people's lives.

Then about 2,500 years ago in Greece, a new point of view dawned in the minds of men. A scientific method evolved which changed the way the world was viewed. Suddenly, there were people who believed that all things were made of atoms; that the Earth was actually a planet going around the Sun, not a sentient being. The Greeks were great thinkers and had a passion for knowledge, something that is evident even in their language. Our word for school comes from the Greek word for "leisure," since they believed that given leisure, man would surely use it in thinking and finding out about things. Slowly, myth began to play a lesser part in people's lives. Still, like the ancients, we continue to seek answers about our infinite universe. Perhaps this is why we can listen to the old myths with interest and appreciation. We can see how far we've come in our quest for answers, but we can also see how far we have to go in our search for the meaning of life and our universe.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- What is a myth? (an imaginative way of exploring natural, observable phenomena or human nature.)
- How is a myth different from a fairy tale?
- What was your favorite myth? Why?
- How many students have heard a storyteller (someone who tells a story, not someone who reads stories)? What is the difference between listening to a storyteller and watching TV or film?
- Define imagination. Look at the root word, "image," and talk about how one can listen with one's imagination.
- How did students feel about being seen or seeing other classmates on stage? Did the students on stage need to be good listeners to be able to perform their task? What other skills does someone need to be a storyteller?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - HISTORY/SOC STUDIES:

Storytelling can be a wonderful link to many aspects of science, including the study of astronomy. Astronomers and physicists today ask the same questions that ancient man asked: How did the world come to be? Where does space end and time begin?

In China, Polaris, the north star, was said to be the emperor of heaven, who sat upon an immovable throne while all the other stars paid him homage. This myth transforms accurate observations into metaphor and poetry.

Ask students to choose a natural phenomenon, such as a constellation, the sun, the color or pattern of an animal or bird, or a specific type of storm like a tornado. Ask them to write a paragraph that imagines how the animal got its color or pattern, how the tornado became a storm element or how the sun or constellation came to shine from the sky. They may want to turn their selected phenomenon into a character, or may wish to create mythical characters that influenced the behavior of their selected phenomenon. Ask students to present their "myths" to the class.

Legend:

- ☉ Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ☉ Discuss with students the use of listening as a way of discovering things about the world around them. Sit quietly and count the sounds you hear in and outside of your classroom. Name sounds that tell us things: sirens, school bells, car brakes, etc. Discuss tone and its meaning. How does your mother say your name when she is angry with you, pleased, worried? You might have students hold a conversation in gibberish where meaning is understood only through tone.
- ❖ Ask students to imagine that they are the first people on earth. Everything is new; nothing is named. Have them close their eyes and walk through a forest looking at things in detail. What do they see? What do they hear? (light and shadow, trees moving, the sound of the wind, leaves falling, etc.) Have them open their eyes and write or tell about what they saw or experienced, and what they discovered.
- ▶ Remind your students that long ago people used to look at the sky at night just as we might watch TV. Ancient people saw in groups of stars the picture of a bear, an archer, a centaur, a swan. The names of these groups of stars (constellations) were given long ago, but are still used by us today. Encourage your students to look at the night sky and write down what they observe (bright stars or planets, twinkling stars, phases of the moon, etc.). If constellations had not been named until the 21st century, what might some of the names be? (e.g., the refrigerator, the bicycle, etc.) Have them name a new constellation and write a story about how it came to be.
- ⇒ Find and read a myth to your class. Ask students what questions it answers. Define myth as an imaginative way of explaining natural, observable phenomena, or exploring the realities and mysteries of nature through images.



BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Campbell, Joseph, *The Power of Myth*. Doubleday, New York, NY, 1988.
- Verniero, Joan C. and Fitsimmons, Robin, *One Hundred and One Read-Aloud Myths and Legends*. Black Dog and Levanthal Publishers, Inc. New York, NY: 1999.