

DAVID PRATHER

Star-Spangled Poetry

Art Form: Theatre

Style: Contemporary

Culture: North American

MEET THE ARTIST:

David Prather is a dynamic actor, writer, and educator who has been on the Music Center roster for two decades as a workshop and residency artist, and performer of his solo assemblies, “World of Myths” and “Poetry Jam”. He has also conducted teacher institutes for both the Music Center and the San Francisco Symphony. In addition, he has performed in the Music Center’s Pillow Theatre and Performing Books series. He has frequently appeared with the L.A. Philharmonic as narrator and host, including the annual holiday sing-a-long at Walt Disney Concert Hall, and for ten years has delighted young audiences at the Hollywood Bowl as “Cap’n Dave” in the popular “Summer Sounds” family programs. The Alley Theatre in Texas has presented two commissioned works by Mr. Prather, “When Harlem Was In Vogue” and “John and Juan.” Mr. Prather is a graduate of American Conservatory Theatre of San Francisco and Princeton University.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

“Star-Spangled Poetry” is a theatrical interpretation of the idea and ideals of America as expressed by our nation’s greatest poets. Starting with Francis Scott Key’s stirring “Star-Spangled Banner” and the War of 1812, the show sets iconic poems in their historical context and then renders them dramatically. Against the backdrop of the torn flag, Mr. Prather becomes not only Key witnessing the British bombardment of Fort McHenry while composing his immortal lines, but a famed actor of the day, Ferdinand Durang, rousing singing them atop a tavern chair. In another scene, Mr. Prather attires himself as Lady Liberty before mounting a pedestal to deliver the famous lines of Emma Lazarus’ sonnet: “...give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” The Declaration of Independence’s promise of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is explored through the works of great poets from Walt Whitman to Allen Ginsberg; through the lives and works of our nation’s poets we experience the evolution of the principle that “all Men are created equal” and how with irony, humor and passion artists across two centuries have defined and defended the democratic promise of the American dream.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Emma Lazarus’ poem “The New Colossus” is graven on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, an icon of American culture. The statue, whose original name was “Liberty Enlightening the World”, was meant to celebrate the centennial of that auspicious date, July 4th, 1776 when America declared its independence from England.

Accordingly, in her right hand Lady Liberty holds a torch; in her left rests a tablet, upon which is inscribed a date in Roman numerals: July IV MDCCLXXVI. Through her poem, Lazarus would come to redefine the meaning of the giant figure in New York harbor as a “mother of exiles.” Sadly, she would not live to see its completion. Yet her immortal words gave expression to the reality of the millions of “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” who poured through America’s “golden door” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

It was another amateur poet, Francis Scott Key, who captured the essence of the other enduring symbol of our nation, the star-spangled banner - our flag. Despite the apocryphal story of Betsy Ross sewing the first flag at the behest of George Washington, the flag as we know it today did not come into being until after America had declared its independence; in fact, in the early stages of the Revolutionary War the most common flag flown in the colonies consisted of thirteen red and white stripes with the British Union in the canton, or upper right-hand box. It was not until 1777 that the Continental Congress, in the midst of war, passed a flag resolution stating:

Resolved, That the flag of the thirteen United States be thirteen stripes alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation.

There is no historical record why stars were chosen, or indeed what congress meant by the phrase “a new constellation.” It is clear that the number thirteen signified the original colonies. However, by 1794 the newly independent United States had grown with the addition of Vermont and Kentucky, and a new flag resolution increased the number of stars, as well as stripes, to fifteen. This flag, which flew over Fort McHenry during the War of 1812 and which inspired Francis Scott Key’s national anthem, was already outdated at the time. In 1818, a Flag Act resolved the problem of a growing nation by stipulating that while the stripes would revert to the original thirteen in number, an additional star would be added to the canton for each new state as it was admitted to the union. And thus was born the star-spangled banner that yet waves o’er the “land of the free, and the home of the brave.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Why do we sing the “Star-Spangled Banner” before baseball games and other sporting events like the Super Bowl? Is this appropriate?
- In his poem, “I Hear America Singing,” Walt Whitman enumerates the “varied carols” he heard in the 19th Century. What are some of the contemporary “carols” heard in America today?
- What does the Declaration of Independence’s promise of “the pursuit of happiness” mean to you?
- What does it mean to be patriotic? How do the various poets in the show demonstrate their patriotism?
- How have the poets in this show helped to expand the notion that “all Men are created equal”?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

Poets reflect their historic era as well as their individual artistic temperament in both the form and content of their work. Francis Scott Key expressed his revolutionary sentiments in a traditional metric scheme. Emma Lazarus appealed to America’s radical promise within the formal corset of a sonnet. Walt Whitman, a true renegade in his personal life as well as his poetry, uprooted traditional notions of form by using free verse to express his vision of America.

Ask students to render the rhyming and metric verses of the “Star-Spangled Banner” or “The New Colossus” in free verse. This can be an individual or collaborative assignment; different clusters of students might tackle one of the four stanzas of the national anthem. Modern language can be employed to clarify meaning, e.g. “Oh say, can you see by the dawn’s early light” might become “Tell me what you see as the sun rises...” or “From her beacon hand glows world-wide welcome” something like “The torch she holds shines its light on all”. Have students read their “translations” aloud, and discuss the merits of the new against the original.



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

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ▶ Have students select a patriotic song or poem and research the era in which it was written. Discuss how the work reflects the author’s feelings about that historic moment. Read the poem aloud reflecting the author’s sentiment.
- ⇒ Have students listen to patriotic music from different wars: a Sousa march or the Confederate ballad “When Johnny Comes Marching Home”; George M. Cohan’s WWI hawkish “Over There”; Irving Berlin’s WWII hymn “God Bless America”; Jimi Hendrix’ incendiary guitar version of the Star-Spangled Banner at Woodstock.
- * Our national anthem states: “Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just; and this be our motto: in God is our trust.” Discuss this in terms of American foreign policy from the doctrine of Manifest Destiny to the two Gulf Wars. You can adapt this concept for younger grades.
- ▶* Have students research their own genealogy to share with the class or a partner. Create improvisations of immigrants arriving in America, or scenes of immigrants passing the Statue of Liberty as “The New Colossus” is recited.
- ❖ Francis Scott Key borrowed the tune for the “Star-Spangled Banner” as did Woody Guthrie for “This Land is Your Land”. Today, we call this practice “sampling”: ask students to adapt the lines/lyrics from one of the poems in the show to a familiar song or rap.



SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Lena Tabori & Natasha Fried, editors. *The Little Big Book of America*. Welcome Books, New York, N.Y. 2002

Margaret Sedeen. *Star-Spangled Banner: Our Nation and its Flag*. National Geographic, Washington, D.C., 2001

Writers on America—Office of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State: <http://usinfo.org/mgck/usinfo.state.gov>