

PAUL TRACEY

The Wandering Minstrel

Art Form: Music, Storytelling

Style: Contemporary

Culture: Western Europe and Southern Africa

MEET THE ARTIST:

Paul Tracey was born in Durban, South Africa, where his father, Hugh - a well known ethnomusicologist - was director of the local radio station. His parents separated when Paul was seven, and for the next ten years he attended boarding schools in England. He sang in the school chapel's choir, taught himself the guitar from a book and became the first Kalimba player in England. The Kalimba is the instrument that his father adapted from the traditional African mbira. Back in Africa, Paul joined the local amateur dramatic society, created a weekly radio show for children and with his brother, Andrew, sang concerts as "The Tracey Brothers." Together they formed the nucleus of "Wait a Minim!" - a musical revue that ran for seven years on four continents, including over a year on Broadway. He appeared in other Broadway and TV shows, and in 1976 moved to Los Angeles where he has created seven different musical assembly programs, many of which reflect his international background and travels.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

The opening song lets Mr. Tracey's audience know his expectations for their behavior during his show. He explains that even though he was born in Africa, he is a white man of British heritage. He plays the actual Song Flute that his mother gave him when he was six years old, and sings about his boat trip to England, arriving in the middle of the famous cold winter of 1947. Luckily his mother had bought him some woolly underwear! He lived at his grandmother's house but went to boarding schools where he learned the flute and taught himself guitar -- this is the idea behind the central song, "I Found It in a Book" which promotes the idea of books and what practical results you can get from reading them. He demonstrates the African mbira (a sound box with metal keys) and his father's Kalimba, then tells a delightful African folk story followed by one of his songs that "The Muppets" sang on television -- "The Ugly Song." The program ends with some appealing string figures; where did he learn these tricks? From a book!



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Mr. Tracey considers himself to be a modern-day wandering minstrel, bringing his entertaining messages to school audiences in California, across the United States and even overseas. He uses his traditional minstrel skills as a storyteller, musician, song writer and singer to encourage children to learn as much as they can while they are still young; to reap the great joy of learning to play a musical instrument; to travel and see the world and how other people live; and particularly, to read books.

The tradition of the minstrel in Europe goes back to the Middle Ages, which are considered to be the 1000 years between the fall of Rome, around 476 A.D. up until the middle of the 15th century. This is the time when wandering minstrels flourished. The nobility and the common folk had little indoor entertainment, so they depended on minstrels to sing to them of battles and heroic deeds, and to tell them stories of romance. (These minstrels should not be confused with the 19th century minstrels in the United States who entertained while dressed in "blackface.") The minstrels skillfully played harps and lutes and they formed guilds, or unions, to train interested people and to maintain their high standards. At

different times and in different parts of Europe they were given a variety of names, such as "jogelour," "troubadour," "minnesanger" or "bard." Every wealthy lord would have a minstrel in his household where he was held in high honor. When the printing press was invented, minstrels lost their popularity, and when the large noble households broke up, the minstrels had to leave their homes in the castles and roam the countryside singing and telling stories to pay their way, earning the title "Wandering Minstrel." Some of them became "waits" in the towns, sounding the watch every hour. By the 16th century, their reputation had "degenerated" to the level of actors, picking up a precarious living by performing at village fairs and in taverns.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Which of the musical instruments you saw today do you think you would like to learn to play?
- What do you think would be some of the advantages or disadvantages of going to a boarding school? How would it be different from your school?
- Mr. Tracey spoke of growing up in Africa and in England. What do you think is most interesting about these places?
- Why do you think Mr. Tracey sang the song called "I Found It in a Book" instead of just telling us about it?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

Human beings are smarter than all other living things on this planet because they can tell each other things. They can learn from one another's adventures in life without having to go through those experiences themselves. We know by listening to others what poison ivy can do one's skin - we don't have to actually touch it ourselves to know this.

Think of something that happened in your own life that taught you a lesson. For example: a fish hook can be very painful if it gets caught on your ear. Or, a cat's claws can be very sharp if you pull its tail. Perhaps it was falling off a ride at a theme park, or slamming your fingers in the car door.

With the aid of a friend or two, find a way of telling your story that will effectively convey your feelings at that time. Act it out, sing a song or tell the story so that it will serve as a warning to your classmates about the consequences. Through hearing of your adventures or misadventures, we can all become wiser. Use humor to get your point across. Self-deprecating humor will endear you to your audience. Don't just tell of your experience; let your audience see it in your face and hear it in your voice as if you are reliving it.

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

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ▶ Create a daily schedule for a boarding school. Include meal times, P.E., class times, breaks, organized games, homework, free time, bed times for different aged students. Compare it to your school schedule and discuss the similarities and differences.
- ✳️ "I Found It in a Book." Following written instructions is an important life skill. Learn to write them! Write clear instructions for someone else on how to do a skill that you know. It could be on how you flip a skate board over a curb, how you do a string figure that you know, or the recipe for a simple dish.
- ❖ Taking inspiration from the story of "Nyangara, the Python," make up a story in which a different animal with a different professional expertise rescues someone from a serious predicament. How will this animal be persuaded to do it?
- ❖✳️ During the Middle Ages, minstrels went from village to village telling stories and singing songs about current events and people who performed heroic deeds. This was one way that information was shared during that pre-technology era. In small groups or as a class, select a current event or a heroic person and write lyrics that could be sung to a familiar melody or performed in a rap style. Present the songs to the class. Discuss the differences and similarities to the way news and information is shared today (television, radio, word of mouth, the Internet, telephones, etc.)



SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Boothman, Nicholas, *How to Make People Like You in 90 Seconds or Less*. (Hardcover)

Jayne, Caroline F, *String Figures and How to Make Them*.

Rutherford, Clarice, and Neil, David H., *How to Raise a Puppy You Can Live With*. Paperback - August 1999

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