

NATIONAL ACROBATS AND MARTIAL ARTISTS OF CHINA



 **STATE** | THEATRE
NEW JERSEY

KEYNOTES



State Theatre New Jersey welcomes you to the school-day performance of the National Acrobats and Martial Artists of China. These *Keynotes* provide information, discussion topics, activities, and resources to use both before and after the performance. The materials are designed to help you integrate the show with learning objectives in many areas of the curriculum.

We look forward to seeing you and your students at the State Theatre!

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

The Martial Artists and Acrobats of Tianjin of the People’s Republic of China was established in 1957. It is one of the foremost acrobatic troupes in China, with an ensemble of over 100 acrobats, magicians and martial artists. The company features over 30 acts, many of which have won prizes in national and international festivals and competitions.

The group has toured extensively to France, Japan, Australia, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Iceland, Italy, Israel, South Korea, North Korea, Belgium, Russia, Hong Kong, and the U.S. Some of the troupe’s acts have performed with Ringling and Barnum & Bailey Bros. Circus, Cirque du Soleil, Big Apple Circus, Swiss Knie Bros., National Circus, and UniverSoul Circus.

CONTENTS

Welcome!	2
The Program.....	3-4
Chinese Acrobatic Arts.....	5
Training to Be a Chinese Acrobat.....	6
China: Facts & Figures.....	7
Passport to China.....	8
Cooperation & Teamwork Games.....	9
Find Your Balance.....	10
Get Ready for the Show!	11



Keynotes © 2017 State Theatre New Jersey

Online at www.stnj.org/Keynotes

Find us at www.stnj.org

Contact: education@stnj.org

State Theatre New Jersey—creating extraordinary experiences through the power of live performance.

DIABOLO GIRLS

Similar to the yo-yo, the diabolo is a spool that is rolled, spun, and tossed from a string stretched between a pair of sticks. It has a long history in China, beginning as a game in the Imperial palace and later becoming popular throughout the country. It is now a national sport. Skilled practitioners can execute all kinds of amazing tricks: twirling it around the body, throwing it up or passing it to another player, or executing gymnastic maneuvers.

The **DIABOLO** is made of two cups attached in the middle by an axle. Its name comes from the Greek words for “across throw.”



CONTORTION WITH CARPET SPINNING

Many types of Chinese acrobatics were inspired by traditional folk arts, using everyday objects in unusual ways. In this number, the acrobats twirl colorful carpets with their hands and feet. They add another layer of difficulty by twisting their bodies into unbelievable positions while keeping the carpets spinning.



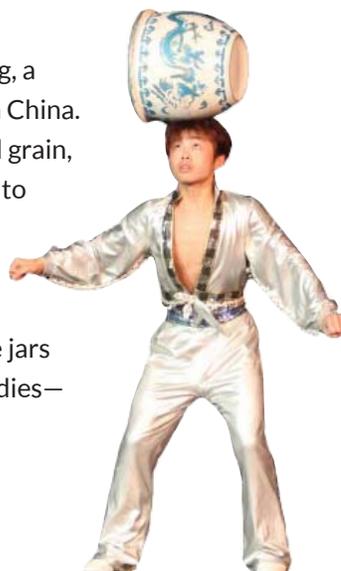
CONTORTIONISTS have the ability to bend and flex their bodies into impossible shapes and positions. Their flexibility is developed through intense gymnastic training. Most contortionists have spines that are more flexible bending in one particular direction; they are either “frontbenders” or “backbenders.”



MARTIAL ARTS WITH JAR JUGGLING

The performers show their skill in traditional martial arts weapons and Shaolin-style boxing, while acrobats perform tumbling tricks and arrange themselves into human pyramids.

This act also features jar juggling, a highly popular entertainment in China. Long ago, jars were used to hold grain, and were also used by peasants to perform various feats during harvest celebrations. The acrobats skillfully balance, spin, toss, juggle, and rotate the large jars using different parts of their bodies—including their heads.



MARTIAL ARTS in China go back more than a thousand years. Originally developed for fighting, they are now a popular sport. Weapons—such as spears, swords, and staffs—are an important part of the Shaolin style of martial arts.



◆ THE PROGRAM

PLATE SPINNING

The acrobats perform plate spinning in combination with contortion and acrobatic skill while holding several plates in each hand spinning on sticks.



HAND JUGGLING

The acrobat juggles up to nine balls at a time with incredible tricks. He bounces and catches the balls on the floor as well as tossing them in the air.



MAGIC

The performers astonish the audience with amazing magic tricks.

STRAW HAT JUGGLING

Using straw hats as props, the acrobats juggle them and perform dynamic combinations and stunts. They work as a perfect team, tossing and passing the hats with speed, precision, and humor.



In **PLATE SPINNING**, the performer balances plates, bowls, and other objects on top of thin poles, then sets the objects spinning without letting them fall. This skill relies on the gyroscopic effect, in the same way a top stays upright while spinning.

JUGGLING is an ancient art found in many cultures, Some of the world's earliest known jugglers were Chinese warriors and entertainers who lived as far back as 770 BC. The most common form of juggling is toss juggling: tossing and catching objects in patterns using the hands. Objects can also be juggled with the feet and other parts of the body—including the mouth! There are endless variations on the types of objects being juggled, how many are juggled at one time, and the patterns the objects take as they fly through the air. It can be done by just one person, or two or more people tossing objects back and forth.



◆ CHINESE ACROBATIC ARTS

Clay figures from the Tang and Han dynasties show acrobats performing handstands and bowl spinning.



This porcelain plate, from around 1800, is decorated with images of Chinese acrobats.



Over its rich 2,500-year history, acrobatics has emerged as one of the most popular art forms in China. The earliest acrobats were agricultural workers and artisans who used the things around them—farm implements, tables, chairs, jars, plates, and bowls—as performance props. They experimented with tricks such as tumbling, balancing, juggling, plate spinning, and rope dancing. These entertaining acts became part of community celebrations, such as harvest festivals. Gradually, acrobatics developed into a type of performance recognizable to anyone in China and even captured the attention of the country’s powerful emperors.



Historical artifacts including poetry and stone-engravings from the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) provide a record of elaborate acrobatic performances with musical accompaniment, including acts that are familiar to this day, such as pole climbing, rope walking, and balancing on chairs. During the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), acrobatics greatly increased in both popularity and skill level. The great poets and painters of that era depicted acrobats and circus performers in their work.

Acrobatic troupes were traditionally family-owned, making their living roaming the country as street performers. Many of the famous acrobatic families in China continued through many generations. Usually acrobatic families taught their acts only to their own children and close relatives in order to protect their secret tricks and techniques.

With the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, all the companies and businesses in the nation—including the acrobatic troupes—became government property. China’s Communist government approved of acrobatics because they saw it as an art of the common people. They made great efforts to foster and develop national arts such as acrobatics; soon every region had its own acrobatic troupes. Eventually, each company developed its own style and acts, and competitions began to be held between the troupes.

When China began to open up to the West in the 1980s, there was an exciting cross-pollination between the two acrobatic traditions. In 1981, Chinese acrobatic acts competed in an international circus festival for the very first time, winning gold and silver medals. As Chinese acrobats became famous around the world, many Western circuses—including Cirque du Soleil, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and the Big Apple Circus—began to hire them for their shows. At the same time, Chinese companies began to develop a new style of their own, inspired by Cirque du Soleil, but with a distinctive Chinese flavor.



This 17th-century Dutch engraving shows street circus performers in China.

◆ TRAINING TO BE A CHINESE ACROBAT

In China, becoming a professional acrobat takes many years of intensive training and hard work. Students begin training around the age of five or six. They leave home to live at the school full time. During their first month, they cannot leave the school grounds, and family visits are not allowed. After that, parents are allowed to see the children only on weekends.

At school, students are up at dawn and train about 10 hours a day, six days a week. They practice core acrobatic skills—gymnastics, juggling, handstands, martial arts, flexibility, and dance—performing the same actions over and over again until they can do them perfectly. In addition to acrobatics classes, students also take general education classes.

As many as 100,000 Chinese young people are enrolled in the country's acrobatics schools. Most students will demonstrate a strong talent in one particular area, and then focus on developing that special skill. After about ten years of study, the most talented students are chosen for professional troupes. Only a very few make it into international companies such as the National Acrobats and Martial Artists of China.

The handstand is one of the first skills an acrobat is required to master.



A young acrobat works on developing flexibility.



This student is practicing Straw Hat Juggling.



Students in their dormitory at the Changfa Acrobatic School practice their skills.



©Michael Yamashita

IT TAKES TEAMWORK

Living and training together helps the students develop other skills that are extremely important to the safety and success of the acrobats. Each member of the group depends on the others to perform their part, whether it's making a perfectly-timed toss of a straw hat or staying strong and steady at the bottom of a human pyramid. Some important qualities the acrobats need to have are:

- **COOPERATION**
- **TRUST**
- **THE ABILITY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS AS A TEAM**
- **RESPECT FOR OTHERS IN THE GROUP**
- **TAKING INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR PART**



◆ CHINA: FACTS & FIGURES

- The official name is the People's Republic of China.
- Its capital city is Beijing (bay-JING).
- In area, China is the world's fourth-largest country.
- With nearly 1.4 billion people, China is the world's most populous country. It has almost 20% of the Earth's population, and more than four times as many people as the U.S.
- China is considered to be the world's longest continuous civilization, going back more than 40 centuries.
- There is no single Chinese spoken language. About 70% of the people speak Mandarin, the country's official language.
- The written Chinese language is the oldest in continuous use. It uses over 10,000 characters.
- China's Forbidden City was the imperial palace from 1420-1912. Located in the center of Beijing, it has 980 buildings and about 9,000 rooms.
- At 3,915 miles, China's Yangtze River is the longest river in Asia, and third-longest in the world.
- Stretching 5,500 miles, the Great Wall of China is the largest human-built structure in the world.
- China has the largest educational system in the world—over 1,170,000 government-run schools enroll over 318,000,000 students.
- In Chinese culture, the dragon represents power, strength, and good luck. It was the symbol of the Emperors of China.
- Chinese New Year is the country's most important holiday. It begins on the new moon on the first day of the new year and last for 15 days. There are many colorful traditions associated with this holiday.



- The giant panda is native to central China. It is classified as a vulnerable species, with only about 1,850 living in the wild.
- Fortune cookies are not from China. They were invented in 1920 by a worker in a noodle factory in San Francisco, U.S.
- China's national sport is table tennis (ping pong). In the 2016 Summer Olympics, China won gold in both women's and men's individual and team competitions.
- Among the many things the Chinese are credited with inventing are gunpowder, fireworks, paper, the compass, the kite, printing, the umbrella, the clock, the abacus, toilet paper, and spaghetti.



TIANJIN

- Tianjin is China's fifth-largest city, with a population of 15.47 million. That's nearly seven million more people than there are in New York City!
- Located about 75 miles from Beijing on the Bohai Gulf in the Yellow Sea, it was an important port and center of trade.
- It was first settled sometime around 340 B.C., and founded as a city in 1404.
- The modern city of Tianjin is a center of manufacturing, finance, shipping, pharmaceuticals, information technology, and biotechnology.

PASSPORT TO CHINA



A passport is an official document issued by the government. You take it with you whenever you travel to a foreign country. It provides proof of who you are and your country of citizenship, and gives you the right to reenter your native country.

Do you have a passport? What country is your passport from? Where were you traveling when you needed your passport?

Make your own passport! Cut out the pictures of things you'll find in China and paste them in the correct spaces. Fill in your information, attach your photo and you have your own passport to China!

PASSPORT

Name: _____

Age: _____

Birthday: _____

Birthplace: _____

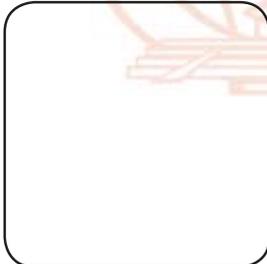
Paste your photo here.



Panda Bear



Great Wall of China



Yangtze River

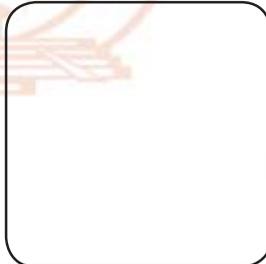
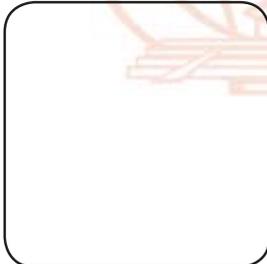
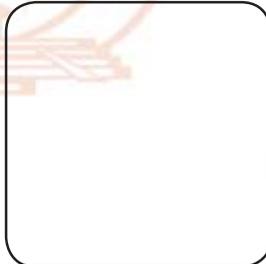


Table Tennis



Chinese Flag



Forbidden City



◆ COOPERATION & TEAMWORK GAMES



PASS THE HULA HOOP

1. Everyone stand in a big circle, with arms stretched out sideways.
2. Place a hula hoop over one person's arm.
3. Everyone join hands.
4. Decide which direction you want the hula hoop to go.
5. Without letting go of anyone's hand, move the hula hoop all the way around the circle until it's back where it started.
6. Once you've gotten the hoop around the circle, try it again, only this time without anyone talking.
7. Break up your class into two or three teams (the teams need to have the same number of people), and see which team can move the hoop around the circle fastest.



THE HUMAN KNOT

1. Form a group of at least five people. Everybody stand in a circle and put your hands into the center.
2. Each person takes the hand of two different people in the circle. You should not be holding the hand of anyone standing directly next to you. There should not be any empty hands.
3. Without letting go of any hands, your circle must untangle itself. If you get stuck, let the people who are watching give you some suggestions.
4. After you've played successfully, try it again—but this time, no talking!

REFLECTION:

- What was the hardest part about the game?
- What skills and strategies did your group use to achieve your goal?
- Did your group work together in a different way when you were not allowed to talk? How?
- Can you think of other types of activities where the teamwork skills you used in this game would be needed?
- What are some examples of teamwork that you saw in the performance of the National Acrobats and Martial Artists of China?

◆ FIND YOUR BALANCE

Whether executing a perfect handstand or spinning a huge jar on your head, balance is one of the most important skills an acrobat needs to practice. Try these balance exercises.

1. Stand on both feet and find your body's center of gravity—the point where it is in perfect balance.
2. Now stand on one foot. Has your center of gravity changed? What happens if you move your arms into different positions while you stand on one foot?
3. With a partner, stand with your toes touching and hold each other's wrists. Both of you lean back, using each other's weight as a counterbalance to keep from falling. Try this with a partner about the same size as you, then with someone much bigger or smaller. How does your counterbalance change with partners of unequal size?
4. Try your two-person counterbalance again, this time experimenting with lifting up a foot, holding out an arm, or using different connecting points (other than holding each other's wrists).
5. Add a third person and see what kinds of counterbalances you can create. Can one person balance the other two?
6. In your group of three, choose your three favorite balances. Try moving smoothly from one shape to another, changing balance points with each transition.
7. Try working in a bigger group—four or more—to create a group shape using as few contact points with the floor as possible. Each person should be connected with the shape. Try to move your shape across the room without losing your balance or breaking the shape.



KNOW YOUR ROLE

Live theater is a collaboration between the performers and the audience. The artists have spent weeks, months—even years—creating a show to inspire and entertain you. The audience has a responsibility to play its part by being respectful and considerate of both the performers and the rest of the audience. Make sure you know your role:

- During the show, focus your full attention on the stage.
- Turn off all electronic devices. Keep them turned off for the entire show.
- Texting or checking messages during the show is a distraction to everyone around you, so resist the temptation!
- Don't talk during the show unless the performers invite the audience to do so.
- If you have to get up during the show to use the bathroom, exit and enter as quietly as possible.
- Food and drinks are not allowed inside the theater.
- Recording or photography of any kind is not permitted.

RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

BOOKS

Chinese New Year Picture Book: Spring Festival Facts and Stories for Kids and Adults, by Christina Huo. Amazon Digital Services, 2015.

I Want to be an Acrobat, by Ivan Bulloch and Diane James. Two-Can Publishers, 2000 (grades 2-4).

Lucky Bamboo Book of Crafts: Over 100 Projects & Ideas Celebrating Chinese Culture, by Jennifer DeCristoforo. 2013.

WEBSITES

Circopedia's History of Chinese Acrobatic Theater

www.circopedia.org/The_Chinese_Acrobatic_Theater

Travel China Guide covers many aspects of Chinese culture and history, including food, holidays, demographics, religion, architecture, and other subjects.

www.travelchinaguide.com/intro



EDUCATION & OUTREACH SUPPORTERS

State Theatre New Jersey's Education & Outreach programs are funded in part by Andersen Corporate Foundation, the Frank & Lydia Bergen Foundation, the Thomas and Agnes Carvel Foundation, Chubb Group of Insurance Companies, Colgate-Palmolive, Deluxe Corporation Foundation, E & G Foundation, The Horizon Foundation for New Jersey, Ingredion Incorporated, Investors Bank, Johnson & Johnson Family of Companies, The Karma Foundation, The Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation, The George Link Jr. Charitable Trust, The Harold I. & Faye B. Liss Foundation, McCrane Foundation, MetLife Foundation, Plymouth Rock Assurance, PNC Foundation, PSEG Foundation, RBC Wealth Management, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Silver Line Building Products, Unity Bank, Victory Worldwide Transportation, The Wawa Foundation, Wells Fargo, and others. Additional in-kind support is provided by Cream-O-Land Dairy, La Bonbonniere Bake Shoppe, and Miller's Rentals. Their support is gratefully acknowledged.



Grant funding has been provided by the Middlesex County Board of Chosen Freeholders through a grant award from the Middlesex County Cultural and Arts Trust Fund.



Made possible by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, a partner agency of the National Endowment for the Arts.

