



Big Sky

Creative Learning
2024 Teacher Resources



Big Sky

Notes for Teachers

Circus is a unique artform that has a long history and tradition. *Big Sky* is an example of contemporary circus performance that incorporates sophisticated production elements and theatrical design to enhance dramatic and physically dynamic performance.

Presented by the spirited young acrobats of Flying Fruit Fly Circus, the audience will witness the mastery of spectacular physical skills with acts that showcase the culmination of rigorous training, discipline and a deep understanding of physical wellbeing.

Using the rich and emotive physical language of circus, a loose narrative emerges through the layering of interpretation and meaning. Contemporary circus can provide a lens of magical realism that offers different dramatic perspectives and challenges perceptions.

We recognise Circus as an artform and subject in its own right, that can be explored within the frameworks of the PDHPE, Drama and Dance syllabi.

The following Creative Learning Notes contain links and suggested activities to build alongside an excursion to *Big Sky*. We recommend using this resource as a starting point, to adapt content in a way that suits the learning needs of your students.

Big Sky

Notes for Teachers

Some of the themes explored in the performance include:

- Adolescence liminal period between childhood and adulthood.
- Big Sky explores the paradox between the:
 - Exploration of the concepts of creativity, freedom and limitless possibilities.
 - Feelings of claustrophobia, restriction and fear that opportunities somewhere else beyond the place they live.
- Young people sharing experiences and contemplating the contradiction between the space (and sky) they are in versus their aspirations and potential futures.
- Moods of trepidation, expectation, control, aspiration, triumph and power are explored through circus disciplines and acts.



Flying Fruit Fly Circus performing *Tempo* at the Sydney Opera House in 2022.

Flying Fruit Fly Circus

About the company

Australian contemporary circus has grown up alongside the Flying Fruit Fly Circus and like a magpie it has adopted, stolen, appropriated and plagiarised from many different styles.

In 1979 the local Murray River Performing Group (MRPG) initiated a school holiday program along with a few intrepid circus artists. Together they trained more than 80 school children from the region over a six-week period and performed in a circus big top. The show, called The Flying Fruit Fly Circus, was an extraordinary success and an unstoppable momentum had been generated.

Subsequent landmark projects helped to influence the development of contemporary circus in Australia, including with China's Nanjing Acrobatic Troupe and Moscow Circus, and cement the company's reputation for innovation and excellence.

Today, Flying Fruit Fly Circus shows continue to be in high demand and their unique select-entry circus program is regarded as one of the best in the world.



Flying Fruit Fly Circus performing Spherical at the Sydney Opera House in 2023.

Flying Fruit Fly Circus

About their training approach

Performing is the whole point of circus. The experience of presenting your acts and ideas on a stage in front of an audience is essential to learning and understanding what it is to be an artist.

The Flying Fruit Fly Circus develops its young performers in not just competency in skills and technique, but artistry.

Young artists in the company are taught to be receptive and open to many and all influences. The training philosophy is to strengthen and condition the bodies of the students, so they are capable of learning and adopting chosen skill sets quickly and easily.

This preparation and training enables young people to enter an industry ten years in the future and it is impossible to predict what that industry will look like. Flying Fruit Fly Circus artists are trained to be at the forefront of the future circus, making circus in their own image.



Flying Fruit Fly Circus performing Spherical at the Sydney Opera House in 2023.

What does a circus artist look like?

Developing the next generation of circus artists

Do you think you have what it takes to join the circus? Are you fit, strong, curious, aware of your body and its limits?

At the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, a circus artist learns to build their physical strength and skills; develop their knowledge of history, traditions and contemporary forms of circus; and explore their creative identity – experimenting across art forms, working in a dynamic team, and innovating with passion and curiosity.

Circus artists have a range of career pathways open to them:

- *Specialists* are experts in one skill area, pushing the possibilities of their apparatus, and are sought after as feature artists in big international companies.
- *Generalists* collect a range of skills allowing them to work in teams and perform solo acts in a range of performance environments (with low ceilings, or outdoor and on the move).

Circus artists can move into social or community circus, while others work as feature or generalist artists within large commercial companies and travelling shows.

Conversation starters



Conversation starters

Getting started with circus

- What do you know about contemporary circus performances? What do you think will happen? Discuss and share your experiences with different forms of circus.
- Using the [Flying Fruit Fly Circus YouTube channel](#), curate a list of must-watch performances. Create a viewing guide that has questions or prompts to use when watching *Big Sky* at the Opera House.

Teaching point: Circus Act Recall

- Where students have seen the performance of *Big Sky*, have students try to recall what each artist did throughout the show. For example; performing specialty act/s, setting up props and apparatus, playing music, dancing, delivering dialogue, clowning, assisting other performers, spotting, etc.
- If students have not yet seen the performance of *Big Sky*, ask them to use their personal experience of circus to date, whether that be on television or other circus performances. There are many different circus skills. Some you may be familiar with; some you may not have seen before!

Teaching point: themes in *Big Sky*

Risk taking, aspirations and the limitlessness of growing up

Confidence is an important part of basic human health. It allows up to share ideas, cooperate with others and try new things.

- Belief in Others: the feeling that you can trust, believe in and be sure about the abilities or good qualities of somebody/something
- Belief in Self: a belief in your own ability to do things and be successful
- Feeling Certain: the feeling that you are certain about something
- Confidence: a feeling of trust that somebody will keep information private.



Flying Fruit Fly Circus rehearsal of *Big Sky* at The Cube Wadonga.
Photograph Zac Edmonds OGA Creative Agency.

Teaching point: themes in *Big Sky*

Risk taking, aspirations and the limitlessness of growing up

- Create a mind map exploring the central theme – “Building confidence”. Map tools and ideas that can help strengthen confidence.
- What do you feel are your strengths and weaknesses? How might you tackle any fears or worries you might have?
- What’s something you’ve achieved that you’re really proud of? What are some goals you have in the future?
- Create metaphors for the experience of growing up. Start with ‘Growing up is like...’. Be as funny, weird, serious or simple as you like.



Flying Fruit Fly Circus rehearsal of *Big Sky* at The Cube Wadonga.
Photograph Zac Edmonds OGA Creative Agency.

Teaching point: activities in the classroom

Getting started with circus

Circus Movements

In pairs, have students reflect on the types of movements executed by circus performers. For example; jumps, leaps, rolls, lifts, falls, tumbles, stretches, etc.

- What sorts of muscle groups are involved in executing these?
- Is the same vocabulary of movement involved across all circus acts?

Learning Circus Skills

Thinking about the circus skills included in the Big Sky performance. List which circus skills would be improved if you practised the following:

- Flexibility
- Balance
- Hand-eye coordination
- Upper body strength (arms, shoulders and back)
- Core strength (stomach and back)
- Teamwork

Circus Warmups

Discuss: Consider the importance of warming up one's body prior to activity.

- What are the dangers if we don't properly warm up our body?
- Would a circus performer's warm-up be appropriate for other athletes? Vice versa?

In groups, have students design and create a warm-up (series of gentle movements or stretches) appropriate to the types of movement and muscle groups involved in a circus performance OR everyday activity (football, cleaning, swimming etc...). They should document their thinking on paper for presentation to the class. Students should be given the option of creating their warm-ups to music if possible.

Have students present their warm-ups to one another.



Flying Fruit Fly Circus rehearsal of Big Sky at The Cube Wadonga. Photograph Zac Edmonds OGA Creative Agency.

Teaching points

Developing presence skills in circus

In a circle, pass a ball from one to another. Find different ways of tossing and transferring the ball: under legs, facing in a different direction, with eyes closed, rolling, bouncing, etc.

Do this for 2 minutes, then ask students to start focusing on the quality of the actions they are making (are they smooth, jerky, fast, aggressive etc...) and be mindful of the way they are holding their body and face throughout. They do not need to inject any particular style into their work at this point, but you will start to notice that their throws become much more considered.

Next, start to articulate qualities you would like to see in their throws, calling them out at random so that students need to think on their feet.

Suggestions might be:

- A joyful throw
- A silly throw
- A super confident throw
- An Australian throw
- A cat-like throw
- A grumpy throw

Once that has been established for approximately 5 minutes, take the physical ball away and mime tossing an imaginary ball around the circle.

As the ball is tossed, students' focus should be on convincingly conveying its size, weight, texture and how difficult/easy it may be to manipulate. These qualities can change with each person, even in mid-air!

Next, explore even more spectacular ways of tossing and catching the imaginary ball; for example, using shoulders, noses, pelvis', bottoms, breath.

Explore how it may be possible for students to make these mimed transfers seem to be very difficult, amazing, spectacular and/or wonderful. Consider the dramatic effect of pausing before a (seemingly) difficult feat. Encourage students to use their voices, bodies, eyes and breath to convey the mimed magic of the ball.

Teaching points

Deep discussion and possible essay questions

How do the performers use circus discipline to show the following feelings or moods?

- Aerials – freedom and aspiration
- Hand Balancing – control, discipline and expectation
- Tumbling – power and triumph

How does the lighting, staging and production elements support the concept of the time between sunset and sunrise?

What do these choices say about the time between the following:

- Child and adult
- Night and day
- Wake and sleep

How is the idea of adolescence shown through the following choices:

- Circus acts
- Dance
- Drama
- Music

The Big Sky space is where magic is possible. How is this idea shown in the show?

- Make links to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and stories.
- How do the performers relate to the sky throughout the show? Why?
- How does the Big Sky represent magic throughout the show? What is magical about the sky?

Teaching points

Deep discussion for aspiring performers

- What sort of character traits would be necessary to work as a circus performer? For example; disposition, commitment, trust, cooperation, concentration, etc.
- How do the disciplines and lifestyle of an aspiring circus performer differ from the disciplines and lifestyle of aspiring dancers, singers, musicians, actors?
- Have students identify character traits that they themselves possess which they consider would make them suitable circus members.
- Where possible, interview professional or aspiring circus artists (or artists from other performance disciplines), and find out about the time, energy, mindset and expenses that they and their families commit to their professional goals.



Flying Fruit Fly Circus rehearsal of Big Sky at The Cube Wadonga.
Photograph Zac Edmonds OGA Creative Agency.

Curriculum connections



Curriculum Links

Connecting with the classroom

We recognise Circus as an artform and subject in it's own right, and themes from *Big Sky* can be explored within the syllabus frameworks of PDHPE, Drama and Dance. We recommend using this resource as a starting point, to adapt content in a way that suits the learning needs of your students.

Big Sky can also be used to explore character narratives, interpersonal relationships, identity and storytelling within Circus, Drama, Dance and English. *Big Sky* incorporates the unique choreography and movements of circus acts, delves into the physical training, agility, and well-being practices essential for performers.

- In PDHPE, students explore how both internal and external factors influence health, safety, and participation in physical activities, mirroring the discipline and environmental considerations circus artists face.
- In Drama, students respond to, interpret, and critically evaluate diverse dramatic forms, techniques, and contexts, much like the multifaceted theatrical performances of the Flying Fruit Fly Circus.
- In Dance, students start forming opinions, understanding contexts, and valuing their roles, reflecting the dedication and artistry of circus performers on a global stage.

Curriculum Links

NSW Curriculum

PDHPE

- PD2-6 Describes how contextual factors are interrelated and how they influence health, safety, wellbeing and participation in physical activity
- PD3-6 Distinguishes contextual factors that influence health, safety, wellbeing and participation in physical activity which are controllable and uncontrollable
- PD4-6 Recognises how contextual factors influence attitudes and behaviours and proposes strategies to enhance health, safety, wellbeing and participation in physical activity
- P8 Describes the components of physical fitness and explains how they are monitored
- H8 Explains how a variety of training approaches and other interventions enhance performance and safety in physical activity

Drama

- DRAS2.4 Responds to, and interprets drama experiences and performances
- DRAS3.4 Responds critically to a range of drama works and performance styles
 - 4.3.1 Identifies and describes elements of drama, dramatic forms, performance styles, techniques and conventions in drama
 - 4.3.2 Recognises the function of drama and theatre in reflecting social and cultural aspects of human experience
 - 4.3.3 Describes the contribution of individuals and groups in drama using relevant drama terminology

Curriculum Links

NSW Curriculum

Drama (continued)

- 5.3.1 Responds to, reflects on and evaluates elements of drama, dramatic forms, performance styles, dramatic techniques and theatrical conventions
- 5.3.2 Analyses the contemporary and historical contexts of drama
- 5.3.3 Analyses and evaluates the contribution of individuals and groups to processes and performances in drama using relevant drama concepts and terminology
- P2.5 Understands and demonstrates the commitment, collaboration and energy required for a production
- P2.6 Appreciates the variety of styles, structures and techniques that can be used in making and shaping a performance
- H2.4 Appreciates the dynamics of drama as a performing art
- H2.5 Appreciates the high level of energy and commitment necessary to develop and present a performance

Dance

- DAS2.3 Gives personal opinions about the use of elements and meaning in their own and others' dances
- DAS3.3 Discusses and interprets the relationship between content, meaning and context in their own and others' dances
- 4.4.1 Values and appreciates their involvement as a dance performer, composer and audience member and how their involvement contributes to lifelong learning
- 5.4.1 Values and appreciates their involvement as a dance performer, composer and audience member and how their involvement contributes to lifelong learning
- P4.5 Values the diversity of dance from national and international perspectives
- H4.5 Acknowledges that the artform of dance is enhanced through reflective practice, study and evaluation

Curriculum Links

NSW Curriculum

Performing Arts

- PA5-2 Experiments with ways in which space can be activated and transformed by the selection and manipulation of performance elements
- PA5-3 Controls energy and expressive skills to create performance presence
- PA5-4 Explores the skills and techniques needed to engage an audience in a collective experience
- PA5-5 Analyses the role of context and interpretation in realising artistic intention
- PA5-6 Researches, documents, and reflects on performing arts concepts, ideas and processes
- PA5-9 Experiments with relevant essential performing arts concepts to new contexts



Flying Fruit Fly Circus rehearsal of Big Sky at The Cube Wadonga. Photograph Zac Edmonds OGA Creative Agency.

Resources

More about the Sydney Opera House

Sydney Opera House: Our Story

- <https://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/our-story>

How we work – strategic plans and programs

- <https://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/about-us/how-we-work>

Community projects

- <https://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/about-us/in-the-community>

Careers and opportunities

- <https://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/about-us/careers-and-other-opportunities>

Creative Learning resources

- <https://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/learn/teachers-and-students/classroom-resources>

50th Anniversary Celebrations

- <https://www.sydneyoperahouse.com/50>

Get in touch

Got questions? Contact us with any enquiries about our education programs for schools via phone or email.

P +61 2 9250 7770

E creativelearning@sydneyoperahouse.com

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