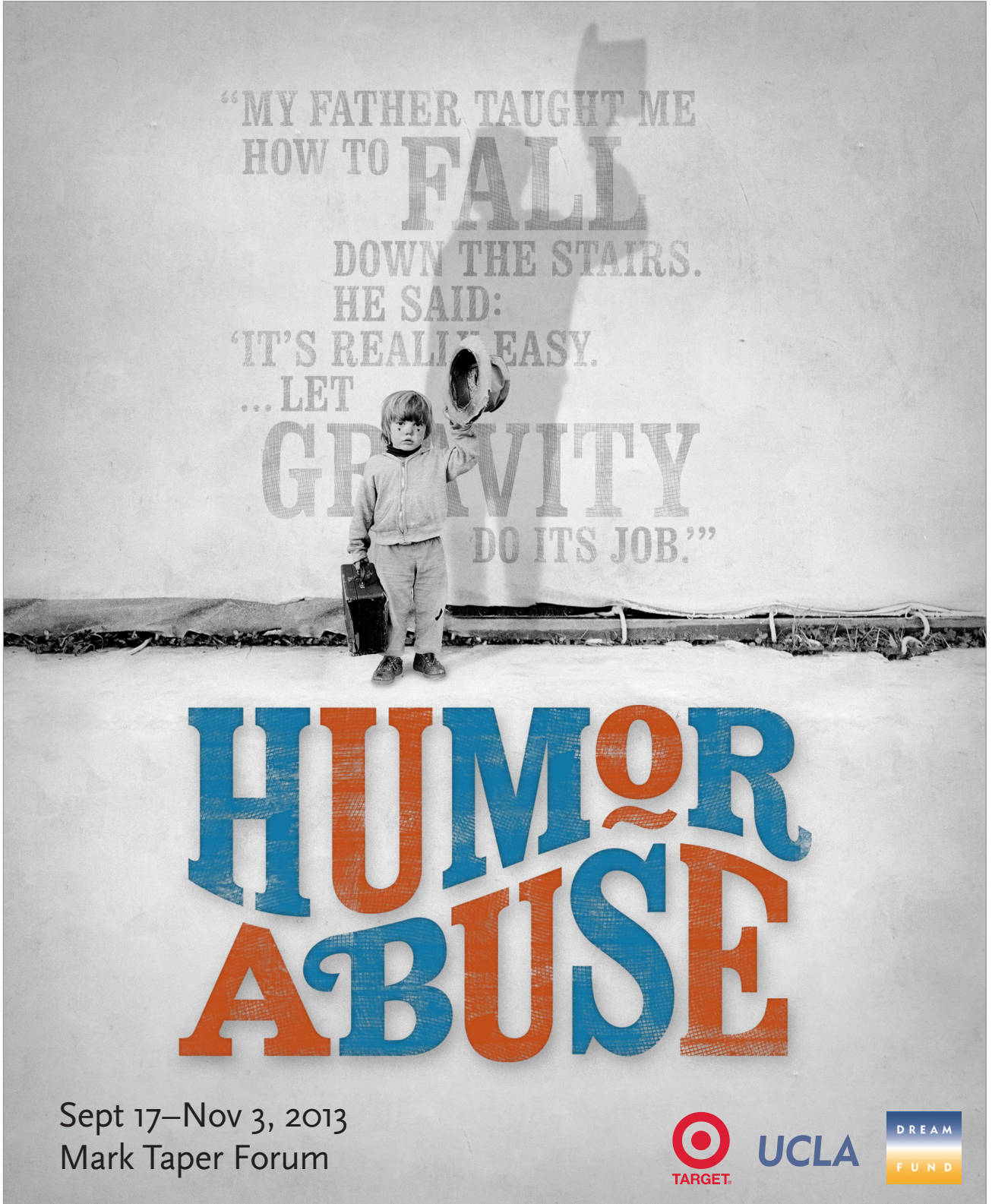


Educator Resources



Welcome

Educator Resources *Humor Abuse*

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Center Theatre Group is excited to have you and your students join us at *Humor Abuse* co-created by Lorenzo Pisoni and Erica Schmidt.

A great play raises questions about the human condition and a great educational experience allows students an opportunity to reflect upon those questions and begin to discover their own answers. To that end, the material in Center Theatre Group's Discovery Guide and Educator Resources raises questions: questions about the power of a clown, questions about parents and children, questions about the human need for laughter. Our goal is to provide you with a variety of entry points into *Humor Abuse*, so that you can choose what best suits you and your students.

The Educator Resources and Discovery Guide are companion pieces, designed to help you prepare your students to see the play and to follow-up after the performance with options for discussion, reflection and creativity.

We have organized the Educator Resources into the following sections:

Student Discovery Guide

The Discovery Guide provides students with background information about the play and the subject matter, as well as questions for individual reflection. Written to be student-driven, the Discovery Guide helps prepare your students for the performance.

About This Play

This section includes a scene-by-scene synopsis of the play to provide you with detailed information about the content and form of the play as well as information about the artists involved.

Comprehension

This section includes background information about the setting and subject matter of the play. We have selected the information that most directly connects to or informs what happens in the play.

This section furthers and deepens the background information provided in the Discovery Guide. It can be shared before the play and/or discussed after the performance. It can also be used to provide research topics for your classroom.

Connection and Creativity

This section provides ways to explore connections between the ideas presented in the play, the students' lives, and the world we live in. In addition, it provides opportunities for your students to use theatre to explore and express. Theatre activities are included that examine both specific artistic aspects of the production, as well as delve deeper into the ideas and questions raised by the production. The questions, activities and information in this section can be used both before and after the performance.

We know the hard work and dedication that it takes to bring students to see theatre. These materials are designed to support you in making the most of that experience. We applaud your passion for sharing theatre with your students and thank you for sharing your students with all of us at Center Theatre Group. We look forward to seeing you at *Humor Abuse*!



L.A.'s Theatre Company

Ahmanson Theatre
Mark Taper Forum
Kirk Douglas Theatre

601 West Temple Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

About *Humor Abuse*

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Scene By Scene Synopsis

Prologue

Lorenzo Pisoni steps on the stage to make a few personal announcements. He is wearing a fat suit. After a brief skirmish with the spotlight, he announces the following:

1. This is a one-man show.
2. He isn't funny.
3. Please turn off your cell phones.
4. You may eat all the candy you want.
5. You may clap all you want.
6. He sweats. A lot.

Auguste Clown

A trunk sits alone onstage with a hat resting on its lid. A hand comes out of the trunk to retrieve the hat. Lorenzo then emerges from the trunk wearing the hat, a fat suit, and carrying a suitcase.

Lorenzo performs his first clown entrée (act). He removes a dummy from the trunk. The two do a bit involving balloons falling from the sky. So many balloons, they knock Lorenzo and the dummy over the back of the trunk. Lorenzo pops up from behind the trunk, no longer wearing the fat suit.

Commedia Intro

Lorenzo explains his family's history with clowning. His great-grandfather immigrated to America from Italy and became a vaudeville comedian. His grandfather sold sporting goods. His father, Larry, ran away from home at the age of 15 to live alone in New York. He worked as a barker, a piano mover, and a follow-spot operator in a nightclub. Two jugglers who performed at the club asked Larry to join their circus; he accepted their offer.

His circus education began with Commedia dell' arte. A slide shows us pictures of Pantalone and Arrlechino. Lorenzo retrieves a dark robe, a hook-nosed mask, and a cane from the trunk, and assumes the persona of Pantalone. In character and using an Italian accent, he tells us a joke his father taught him when he was four.

The Three Clowns

"One day, little Annabella got her monthly bleed for the first time in her life. Not quite certain what was happening, she decided to tell little Gianni. Little Annabella dropped her panties and showed little Gianni. Little Gianni's eyes opened wide in d' amazement. 'You know,' he said, 'I'm no doctor. But it looks like someone just ripped your balls off.'"

Knocking sounds come from inside the trunk. As Pantalone, Lorenzo uses his cane to wedge the trunk lid open. He tries to help his unseen servant, Arrlechino, out of the

trunk. They argue in Italian (with English subtitles projected on a screen).

Pantalone: Arrlechino! What the fuck? I always have to help you.
Wait! One, two, three!

Pantalone is shoved into the trunk. Lorenzo is now playing Arrlechino, still in Italian.

Arrlechino: Hello everyone! I am Arrlechino! I want to tell the story of the three clowns. The first was blind, 'I can juggle fire.' The second had no hands, 'I can juggle two donkeys!' And the third clown didn't have any legs, 'I can dance the tarantella. Let's go find a circus! Let's go!' They walked and walked until they arrived at a circus. Finally, the head of the circus appears and says, 'Why are you here? Don't you know this circus already has three clowns? Get out of here! Try New York.'"

More knocking sounds come from inside the trunk. Arrlechino opens the trunk and jumps in. Immediately after, Lorenzo steps out of the trunk wearing his regular clothes.

Dad as Shaman

Lorenzo wonders about how his father became a clown in the first place. Larry once told him that he learned clowning from the shaman, the medicine man, and the monkey king.

The shaman is a medium between the seen and unseen worlds. The medicine man has the power to heal with his potions. And the monkey king embodies chaos and is an unpredictable prankster. Combined, those three characters make the clown. According to Larry, "Clowning is holy (his circus rehearsed in a church). It's about spirits, and brews, and chaos."

As a child, Lorenzo didn't quite see it that way. He was confused by the unusual gifts he received from Larry: masks, horns, bells, and, at 9 years old, a rack of moose antlers little Lorenzo had to check onto an airplane.

With a bone-rattle, monkey king mask, and an old staff, Lorenzo performs a Peking Opera-style dance that combines acrobatics and martial arts. The routine ends when he crashes through a hole in the stage floor.

Tripping, Falling, and Backflips Training

After climbing out of the hole, Lorenzo describes and demonstrates how Larry taught him to be a clown. It all came down to discipline and repetition. Tripping, falling, and backflips were all mastered the same way: by doing it over and over and over again.

Backflips

Lorenzo remembers trying to run away from the circus as a toddler. He was quickly found by the sheriff and returned to his parents. Larry put bells on Lorenzo's shoes and made him wear a button that said, "I belong to the Circus."

After Larry ran away from home at 15, he and his father were estranged for over ten years. After Lorenzo was born, Larry spent two years tracking his father down. Soon after they began rebuilding their relationship, Lawrence Joseph Pisoni was killed in a car accident.

Lorenzo knew “the death of [Larry’s] father was inspirational. My dad became a silent clown who never laughed.”

Double Take

Larry turned everything into a teachable moment. Regular domestic activities were opportunities to demonstrate the art of tripping, dropping, and walking into things. Lorenzo perfected the “double take” at the dinner table. He learned quickly that properly mimicking his father’s double take was the easiest way to earn more dessert.

Debut

Lorenzo takes us back to his circus debut. He was two years old. During intermission, he entered the ring wearing a little hat and carrying a suitcase full of juggling pins. He performed a few acrobatics and did his best imitation of juggling. He was very serious and committed and performed his intermission act every day. But the Pickle Family Circus counted on the intermission for fundraising. Lorenzo’s act kept people in their seats, rather than buying food or souvenirs. To stop him from going onstage during intermissions, his parents finally worked him into the show.

Dancing Gorilla

Onstage, Lorenzo recreates his dancing gorilla act.

Hats

Hats were everywhere in Lorenzo’s childhood home. All different kinds of hats: collapsible top hats, porkpies, bowlers, berets. Larry taught Lorenzo how to balance hats and numerous other household items on his nose the same way he taught him all the other circus skills: by constant repetition. In frustration, little Lorenzo would complain, “I can’t do it!” Larry would respond, “Can’t do it... *yet*.”

Dad’s Entrance into the Ring

Larry’s trademark entrance had him hunched over, carrying a huge trunk on his back. He would walk around the entire ring before placing the trunk in the center. He would then unpack the trunk in the exact same way, every time.

Intro to Trunk and Balloons

Lorenzo spent a lot of his childhood in that trunk. Alone, with props, with other performers, with balloons — sometimes with all four. In the summer, it’s hot inside those trunks, and balloons often pop unexpectedly. Even today, Lorenzo hates balloons.

Contract

At six, Lorenzo was handed an official Pickle Family Circus performer contract. Larry’s previous clown partners had moved on to other projects. He wanted his son to take their

place. “I don’t want to take away your childhood,” Larry told Lorenzo, “but if you sign, it means that you must do every single show.” Lorenzo signed. He and his father were clown partners for the next four years. Lorenzo tells us, “These were the greatest years of my life.”

Geppetto Routine

Larry and Lorenzo toured with the Pickle Family Circus in a Dodge van. This was their home on the road. Larry cooked all their meals. Father and son ate together and practiced together every day.

One of their first acts was called the Geppetto Routine. Little Lorenzo was dressed to look exactly like his father. And they had a wooden dummy designed to look exactly like Lorenzo trying to look exactly like Larry. The act began with Larry carrying the trunk onstage with Lorenzo and the Lorenzo puppet inside. During one performance, the puppet’s red nose fell off in the trunk, leaving a gaping hole in its face. They were already onstage and well into the act; there was no way to get offstage and fix it. So Larry forced Lorenzo into improvising, saying, “Act like a dummy!” The audience loved the act and didn’t know anything had gone wrong. But Lorenzo was angry. He hadn’t practiced being a dummy and didn’t like to go onstage unprepared. But his father was proud of him and as a peace offering he made Lorenzo’s favorite meal — ricotta pancakes.

Food and Juggling

Learning to juggle was really hard. The pins were heavy and too big for his eight-year-old hands. It hurt to catch them; it really hurt if you missed them and they hit you. Perhaps to bring laughter to his son’s day, Larry always packed a plastic banana in Lorenzo’s lunch. Every day. And every day, Lorenzo brought the banana home to be packed in his lunch the next day.

City of Brotherly Love

Larry and Lorenzo’s last tour as clown partners was a challenge for the entire Pickle Family Circus. Bad weather, lice, injuries. Everything that could go wrong did. This was also the year Lorenzo’s parents decided to separate.

During intermission at a performance in Philadelphia, Larry became enraged when a technician misplaced an important prop. Yelling, he chased the tech all over the lot. He was drunk. Lorenzo realized that his father was human, flawed, and “abusing the humor.”

Lorenzo didn’t want to go onstage with his father after that. But they had to perform the rest of their act. For the first time, Lorenzo felt like being Larry’s clown partner was just a job, a job he didn’t want to do.

Balloon for Fear

That year, Larry left the Pickle Family Circus and the clown partnership with his son. Lorenzo stayed on, going on tour without either of his parents at age eleven.

Before leaving for the tour, Larry gave Lorenzo a few important items: stationary, self-

addressed stamped envelopes, a plastic banana, and a “magic” balloon. He told his son, “Whenever you get scared by a trick or anxious because your bits aren’t going well, blow up this balloon as big as you can — without popping it — trapping all those feelings inside. Then let the air out in your face, so those anxieties and fears are blown past you.”

Lorenzo took over some of his father’s acts and responsibilities. He demonstrates one of them. A porter carrying five suitcases of different shapes and sizes must get them all to the top of a staircase. The suitcase and stairs have other ideas, sending the porter falling down the stairs over and over again.

The second year of touring on his own, Lorenzo became ringmaster and took on the rest of his father’s routines. It was time for him to come up with his own.

Cafe D’Art

During two years of touring across the United States, Lorenzo was often alone. The Pickle Family Circus company members did everything they could to keep him company and comfort him. But he was set on being taken seriously and wanted to prove he was an adult.

Of course he had questions for his dad about the theatre, clowning, life. They were both working a lot, so even though Lorenzo would leave messages on his father’s answering machine, it was difficult to actually connect. He could have written letters, but that would mean having to write his thoughts and feelings down, and that didn’t feel possible.

Instead, Lorenzo built his own rituals and pre-show routines. In every town, he’d find a cafe that had nice waitresses and served ricotta pancakes. He’d eat there, alone, before every single solo performance.

High Dive

The first clown act Lorenzo created for himself was a high dive. He wore a full body, green bathing suit, flippers, a swim cap and goggles. His key props are a tall ladder and a small bucket of water. His challenge is to get up the ladder wearing all of his gear and then dive safely into the bucket below. He struggles with all of his props, and while they often get the better of him, he ultimately accomplishes his goal. Sort of.

Poof, He’s Gone

When Lorenzo was thirteen, he decided it was time to leave the circus and join the real world. He enrolled in a San Francisco high school and moved in with his mom. Larry stayed in the city, and although he moved a lot, he always had a pull-out couch for Lorenzo among the puppets, trunks, commedia masks, tubas and antlers strewn about the apartment.

Larry remarried with Lorenzo acting as best man. But their connection was tenuous. Larry told Lorenzo that he was the only thing keeping him in San Francisco. Lorenzo comments, “He was waiting for me to talk to him. I was too busy being a teenager.” Lorenzo told Larry, “Why don’t you go.”

This was Lorenzo's revenge. He and Larry had spent every moment of their lives together for the better part of ten years. When his father decided to leave the Pickles, all of that was just over. "Poof, he was gone. And now I was older and he was around and so poof, I was gone."

Sandbags and I am No Island

Lorenzo completed high school and college. Like most graduates, he had student loans to deal with. His first job was in Las Vegas with Cirque du Soleil. After a year, he relocated to New York. Larry contacted him, asking if he'd like to join his one-man show. Larry said he'd call it a "one-and-a-half man show."

They hadn't spoken for a year, but working together again was natural, albeit mostly silent. It felt great to partner together again. Their act placed Larry alone on a bare stage, trying to avoid being hit by the falling sandbags Lorenzo operated from the wings. Lorenzo performs the routine as he describes it.

Lorenzo Pickle — Why?

Recently, Lorenzo discovered that for the last five years Larry has been using his name. Not just onstage, as he'd always done — Lorenzo Pickle was Larry's clown persona even before Lorenzo was born. But now Larry was going by Lorenzo in social settings, too. Lorenzo realizes, "The person I spent my childhood years with, the only person I've called Dad, wasn't ever Larry. I don't really know Larry. I know Lorenzo Pickle and as far as I run from the circus, I'm Lorenzo the second. It's always been his name."

Lorenzo Pickle

Lorenzo transforms into his father's clown character, Lorenzo Pickle. He brings a trunk onstage. Sitting on it, he "recognizes" someone in the audience and invites them onstage. He presents his guest with a balloon on a string, but just before he can hand it over, he trips and the balloon floats away. He tries over and over again to give his guest a balloon, but the balloons won't cooperate. The bit ends when Lorenzo trips into a front flip, landing on his back and popping the balloon against the floor.

Lorenzo tells us that Larry had been performing that act for 25 years when, during a show, he landed badly. For eight months he struggled with pain, taking only aspirin and continuing to perform. He finally went to the hospital and was told he'd broken his back and it hadn't healed correctly. In the course of his clown career, Larry had survived every imaginable break, crack, dislocation, pull, tear and sprain. But this was different. He could still perform some things, but the back injury meant the end of Lorenzo Pickle. Lorenzo tells us, "Larry walks slower than he used to but he gets around and he does other acts. But Lorenzo Pickle, my silent, namesake clown dad, he's gone."

Lorenzo blows up a balloon as big as he can without popping it. He lets the air out in his face.

Blackout.

Comprehension

Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

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The Circus

(A shorter excerpt can be found in the *Humor Abuse* Discovery Guide.)

“It is a living entertainment performed by ordinary people who are capable of extraordinary feats. Execute a triple somersault any place in the world and people will always look on in amazement...”

— Paul Binder, Ringmaster, Founding Artistic Director, Big Apple Circus

circus n. from the ancient Greek “kirkos,” meaning “circle” or “ring.”

Circus is an international art form. Because so much of the circus is nonverbal, it has an appeal that transcends language, cultures and borders. The circus represents freedom and adventure, the breaking of conventions, living outside the norm.

The circus has roots in every civilization. Artwork in ancient Egyptian tombs depicts jugglers and clowns. Descriptions of grand acrobatic performances are documented as far back as 200 BCE in the Han Dynasty of China. From ancient Greece through the Middle Ages and beyond, groups of traveling performers, musicians and menageries (collections of exotic animals) crossed continents in search of audiences.

Some of the circus’s key elements were first brought together during the Roman Empire. Animals, chariot races, staged battles, and jesters entertained Roman citizens in the Coliseum and other amphitheaters, such as Circus Flaminius and Circus Maximus (which could seat 250,000 people).

Most credit the invention of the circus to Englishman Phillip Astley. In 1768 Astley founded a riding school in London. To attract business, he offered demonstrations of stunt riding and equestrian skills, adding acrobats and clowns later to keep audiences coming back for more. His greatest contribution to circus history was the ring. Working in a circle measuring 42 feet in diameter, Astley’s ring allowed the horses to comfortably run at a full gallop, maximizing the centrifugal force needed for a rider to stand upright on the horse’s back. It didn’t take long for these performances to become wildly popular.

John Ricketts established the first American circus in Philadelphia in 1793, and President George Washington was one of its many fans. America was a young country and still growing. While European circuses were performed in permanent buildings, the American circus had to “take the show on the road” in order to reach audiences. This was made easier in 1825 when Josiah Purdy Brown invented the circus tent. It was light and easy to travel with and faster and cheaper to set up and tear down than a temporary building.

Perhaps the most influential figure in circus history was P.T. Barnum. With exotic animals, daredevil acrobats and eccentric clowns, Barnum’s traveling circus was characterized by the extreme — the largest elephant in the world, the oldest woman in the world, the smallest man in the world. It was a multi-million dollar business.

Barnum was a marketing genius, and while many of his “largest...,” “smallest...,” and “oldest...” attractions turned out to be fake, his circus attracted millions. Barnum knew a one-ring circus could only seat so many people, so he added a second and then a third ring. To reach audiences across the country, Barnum’s circus began traveling by train in

Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

1872, and by the early 1890s needed over 65 train cars to transport its more than 4,000 performers, technicians and animals.

By the early 1900s the circus was the main source of live entertainment in America, featuring a ringmaster, acrobats, gymnasts (tumbling, trampoline), aerial artists (high wire, flying trapeze), contortionists, jugglers, clowns, and equilibrists (stilts, plate spinning, rolling globe). Many traveling circuses also included a daredevil act, such as fire-eating, human cannonball, knife throwing or sword-swallowing.

Circus Day was often the biggest event of the year. Businesses and schools closed so everyone could enjoy the spectacle. During World War II, the circus was such a vital part of national morale that President Franklin Roosevelt gave the Ringling Brothers Circus special permission to use the railroads, while travel for the public was restricted to support the war effort.

But in the 1950s the circus became less popular. In contrast to film and television, which felt fresh and new, some circus acts seemed old and recycled. In the 1960s, as the political climate began to change, animal rights activists began questioning the ethics of caging and domesticating exotic, wild animals. At the same time, many American circus artists and audiences grew less interested in extravagant and expensive spectacles.

The 1970s brought a new kind of circus — one that was socially conscious and committed to community involvement. Artists were moving away from the circus as a glorification of the bizarre and toward the circus as a tool for social change, artistic-expression, and a celebration of what it means to be human. It was in this climate that the Pickle Family Circus was born.

This Nouveau Cirque (“New Circus”) movement continues today, with circuses such as the Big Apple Circus and Cirque du Soleil. The circus arts are booming, with hundreds of schools and performing groups all over the world. In addition, many groups, like Clowns Without Borders, Women’s Circus and CircEsteem, are looking at the ways circus can teach life lessons about empowerment, hard work, and cooperation.

“Circus, when well done, is a metaphor. It reminds us of the boundless potential of our human nature. It shows us... that we can overcome our limitations.”

— Dominique Jando, PBS Arts: Circus as High Art

Connections and Creativity

This section provides ways to explore connections between the ideas presented in the play, the students' lives, and the world we live in. In addition, it provides opportunities for your students to use theatre to explore and express. Theatre activities are included that examine both specific artistic aspects of the production, as well as delve deeper into the ideas and questions raised by the production. The questions, activities and information in this section can be used both before and after the performance.

Cultural Mapping

Objectives:

- Students will gain knowledge of similarities and differences among their classmates.
- Students will be introduced to *Humor Abuse* and begin to reflect on the play.

Exercise:

Ask the students to move the desks to the side and stand in a circle.

Describe the room as a map of the world. Identify Los Angeles in the space.

Have students who were born in Los Angeles gather in that place. Have the other students group themselves according to their birthplace (north, east, south or west of Los Angeles). Each group must determine two additional things that they have in common and report back to the whole class. (Example: The members of the “north” group all like pizza and are the oldest in their families.)

Repeat activity using other divisions such as:

- Oldest, middle, youngest, only child.
- Speak one language, two languages, etc.
- Quotes from the production:
(Ask each student to stand by the quote that most intrigues them. Discuss in the group why they chose that quote. What intrigues them about it?)
- Quotes from *Humor Abuse*:
“I have suffered from years of humor abuse.”
“Do it again,”
“Act like a dummy!”
“Tragedy inspires comedy,”
“See you down the road.”

Tableau/Frozen Picture

Objectives:

- Students will practice using their bodies to communicate an idea or theme.
- Students will reflect on the varied interpretations of the theme.
- Students will reflect on *Humor Abuse* through a physical exploration of its themes.

Exercise:

Divide students into pairs. Student A is the artist. Student B is the sculpture.

Have student A create a statue out of B on the theme of “the future.” Statues can be realistic or symbolic, personal or global. Examples: flying cars, world peace, destroying the environment, graduating from college.

Have each student title their statue and present to the class.

Repeat exercise with B as the artist and A as the sculpture.

Repeat with any of the following show-specific themes: humor, clowns, circus, parents and children, laughter, partnership. Have each student sculpt an image that represents one of these themes. Discuss what these ideas mean to your students and what these ideas mean in *Humor Abuse*. Are they similar or very different?

Serious about Comedy: The Handshake Game

Objectives:

- Students will reflect upon the phrase “serious about comedy” in *Humor Abuse*.
- Students will think about what they take seriously, both small and large.
- Students will learn what their fellow classmates take seriously, both small and large.

Discuss the phrase “serious about comedy.” This can be done either before or after the students see the show. What does it make them think about? How is it used in *Humor Abuse*?

Ask students to brainstorm a list of things they are “serious about.” Ask them to include things more traditionally associated with being taken seriously (education, health, family, the environment) and things not usually associated with seriousness (chocolate, sleeping, texting, frisbee, coffee, TV.) Ask them to choose one item from the second, less serious category that they are willing to share.

Have everyone in the class stand in an open space.

In this activity, everyone will shake hands with the person nearest them and share their name and what they are serious about. Examples: “My name is Juliet and I am serious about Facebook”; “My name is Alex and I am serious about French fries.”

After they share, they will “become” the other person: Juliet will become Alex; Alex will become Juliet.

Next, they will turn to a new partner and introduce themselves with their new name and new “serious about” subject. Students continue to shake hands and exchange identities.

Explain to them that after a couple of rounds, they may become totally confused and forget who they are. If that happens, the student should sit down. Stress that the confusion is part of what makes the game fun!

When/if they get their identity back, they should also sit down. For example, if someone comes up to Alex and says “I’m Alex and I’m serious about French fries,” then Alex will take back his identity and sit down.

Continue playing until only a few students are left. Form a circle and go around the room with everyone sharing their real name and what they are serious about.

Repeat the game with items from the first (more serious) list if it seems appropriate and time permits.

Discuss.

Pictures to Life

Objectives:

- Students will reflect on the story and the person behind the picture by analyzing a photograph.
- Students will communicate the character's thoughts, feelings and activities through tableau and writing.

Collect a variety of pictures from the circus, both past and present. Ask students to find images that intrigue them. If there is more than one person in the picture, ask the student to select one person to focus on.

Have each student reflect: What is the story in this picture? What is this person thinking or feeling at this moment? If this person could speak, what would she or he say?

Have participants freeze in the image in their pictures. If the picture only shows the face, have them imagine the physicality of the body.

One at a time, ask each participant to share something that his or her circus character is thinking or feeling. Ask the other participants to listen for the beginning of stories in the shared thoughts and feelings.

CHARACTER BIOGRAPHY:

Have each participant create a character biography including: character's name, setting (where and when), job, greatest want, greatest fear, most important person to them, most peaceful place. Let them know that as the writer, they will use their imagination and observation to answer these questions. If the picture is historical, they can also research to get more information.

Ask for volunteers to share their profiles.

A Day in the Life:

Using the character biography, have students write an ordinary day in the life of their characters. What do they imagine this circus person's life is like? What is "ordinary" in the circus?

If time permits, discuss the fact that plays seldom take place on an ordinary day. Have the students look back at their character profile. What would happen if the character's greatest want or greatest fear came true? How would that change this ordinary day?

Share the reflections.

Personal Pictures

Objectives:

- Students will use pictures from their own lives and childhoods to create autobiographical images and text.
- Students will reflect on the use of autobiographical pictures in *Humor Abuse* to help tell the story.

Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

Throughout *Humor Abuse*, Lorenzo Pisoni uses photographs from his childhood growing up in the Pickle Family Circus. One of the most compelling images is a picture of Lorenzo at two and a half with a trunk and a hat, ready to perform for the audience. The image of young Lorenzo is projected onto a screen during the show, and we see adult Lorenzo physically recreate the picture complete with top hat and trunk.

Ask students to bring in a photograph from their childhood. As in the activity above, have them freeze in the image in their picture.

One at a time, ask each participant to share something that his or her younger self is thinking or feeling in this moment. Stress that if they don't remember, they can use their imagination.

Ask the other participants to listen for the beginning of stories in these shared thoughts and feelings.

If time permits, have each class member share his or her picture with the class, including his or her age in the picture, where the picture was taken and why, and anything else he or she remembers.

Reflection: What was it like to step back into your younger self? If you could say one thing to the child in the picture, what would you want him or her to know?

Imagine that this picture is the start of your own autobiographical show. What would you title the show? What story would you want to tell?

What was it like to “meet” the younger versions of your classmates? Did it help you see people in a new way?

There is a saying “a picture is worth a thousand words.” As you watch *Humor Abuse*, notice how the photographs help tell the story. How do the pictures and the text work together to tell us the story?

Telling Your Story: Creating Autobiographical Material

Objectives:

- Students will reflect upon the creative process used to create *Humor Abuse*.
- Students will explore the art form of solo autobiographical stories and reflect upon the universal within each unique story.
- Students will use questions, ideas and text from *Humor Abuse* to create their own autobiographical works.

In *Humor Abuse* Lorenzo Pisoni shares stories of his childhood, growing up in The Pickle Family Circus and performing with his father as his clown partner. While the setting and circumstances of Lorenzo's story are unique, the themes of parent/child relationships, communication and growing up have universal resonance.

Lorenzo Pisoni and Erica Schmidt — co-creator and director of *Humor Abuse* — worked together to create the text and the movement that would best tell the story.

Comprehension | Connections & Creativity

Use any or all of the following writing prompts from *Humor Abuse* to help students generate autobiographical material. You can also use additional questions from the Discovery Guide as well as incorporating the Personal Pictures activity above.

Depending on time and the specific needs or goals of your class, this material can take the form of journal entries, a short memoir, a slide show with pictures and text, or the beginnings of a solo show.

CLASS DISCUSSION

Why tell autobiographical stories?

Why tell your story in a solo format?

Why is it interesting to see or read someone's personal story about his or her childhood? Why do we care?

WRITING PROMPTS

1. Growing Up Timeline

Throughout *Humor Abuse*, Lorenzo takes us through a timeline of his childhood at various ages:

Age 2 ½	Circus debut
Age 6	Signed contract to perform with the Pickle Family Circus
Ages 6 –10	Performed across the country as clown partner with his father
Age 10	Parents separated
Age 11	Went on tour with the Pickle Family Circus without either of his parents
Age 12	Became ringmaster of the Pickle Family Circus
Age 13	Left the circus to go to high school

Have students create their own personal timelines: where they lived, what mattered to them, what they were doing etc. What moments might they highlight to create their own solo works?

While Lorenzo Pisoni and Erica Schmidt were creating the script for *Humor Abuse*, she would give him assignments such as, “write four stories from when you were 10–14.” Have the students use their timelines and expand some of the events into stories.

2. I Come From

Lorenzo shares a little about his family background, where he comes from and how his father got involved with the circus, saying that “[Circus and Commedia dell’arte] came naturally to the son of the son of an immigrant; he already spoke Italian.”

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Write about your family and where they come from. Is there something that comes naturally to you as the daughter or son of the daughter/son of the daughter/son...?

Lorenzo grew up in the circus and jokes that “clowning is hereditary.” What is something you have inherited from where you grew up? From your family? What is a way in which you have followed in your family’s footsteps, or hope to? Is there a way you have chosen to go in a different direction?

3. Do What You Love

What is something you loved to do as a child (soccer, dancing, painting, reading, etc.) Describe learning this — what did/do you love about it? Why did you love it? Could this activity serve as a framework for telling your story the way that the circus creates a framework for *Humor Abuse*?

4. Food and Family

In *Humor Abuse*, we see a moment when Lorenzo is mad at his father. His father makes pancakes as a peace offering. Lorenzo shares a slide of his father’s recipe for Ricotta pancakes.

Write about food that is important in your family. Is there a food that is used as a peace offering, a food for celebration, a food for comfort? Is there a recipe you would like to share? Why?

5. Personal Contract

When he was 6 years old, Lorenzo’s parents presented him with a contract saying “You have been choosing to perform every day. If you sign this, that means you must perform in every show no matter if you are angry, or want to go play in the park, or draw.” Lorenzo signed the contract and became his father’s clown partner. Create a contract for yourself. What is something you make a promise to yourself to do no matter what? Sign the contract.

6. Communication

Lorenzo says about his father, “I had questions for him but couldn’t ask. Or just didn’t.” The play is his chance to say and ask the things he wanted to say, but was never able to until his father came and saw the show.

What would you like to ask a parent or family member that you haven’t been able to? What do you think they might want to ask you?

Why is it sometimes so hard to talk to the people we are closest to? What gets in the way? If you could say one thing to a family member, what would you want to share?

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7. Realization: Parents (Adults) are Human

In *Humor Abuse*, Lorenzo says that “Everyone has a moment when they realize the parent they idolize is human and fallible. Sometimes it’s a big event and sometimes, it’s the simplest of things.”

Write about that moment when you realized your parent or an important adult was “human and fallible.” What happened? How old were you? How did you feel? Can you describe any sensory memories around this experience? What did you see, hear, smell, taste, touch?

8. Blue Balloon

Lorenzo shares that when he went on tour at eleven years old, his father gave him a “magic blue balloon,” saying, “Whenever you get scared by a trick or anxious because one of your bits isn’t going well, blow up this balloon as big as you can without popping it — trapping all those feelings inside of it. Then let the air out in your face, so that those anxieties and fears are blown past you.”

Have students reflect on what they would put inside their own blue balloon. If time permits, give each student a blue balloon and have the class do this activity together. Stress that this is personal and doesn’t need to be shared verbally with anyone unless they want to.

9. Let It Shine

In an interview about *Humor Abuse*, co-creator and director Erica Schmidt shared that, “part of what I love about directing is figuring out what people are good at and allowing it to shine.”

Have students think about something that they are good at and how they can let it shine in their lives. How would it feel to let yourself shine?

10. Title

What would you title your memoir or show? Why?

Our Class Clowns (Lesson 1)

Description

Lorenzo Pisoni has explored the circus art of “clowning” since he was a kid. In *Humor Abuse*, he lets us watch his process as he creates a new clown character. He hopes he’ll find a character that makes us laugh and think. Lorenzo starts with his own body, voice and imagination first — the actor’s toolkit. In this activity, students discover, imagine and craft a clown character based on their own actor’s toolkit.

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Materials

String. Red clown noses. Scissors.

Introduction

There are different stories that explain why a big red nose has become a symbol for clowns. Some say that when early clowns acted tipsy, they had red noses. Others give credit to a 19th century clown called “Pickled Herring.” Others say one of the famous Fratelli Brothers, who were 20th century clowns, started the trend of wearing a red clown nose.

Warm-Up

Ask students to walk around the room and cover the space. They can start at a regular pace. The teacher then suggests different ways to exaggerate the movement a little bit as the students are walking. For example, the teacher can say, “Walk as if you have big clown shoes on; walk as if you are filled with helium; walk as if you are walking through a very tiny hallway.” These simple suggestions help students understand what happens when a simple physical movement like walking gets exaggerated.

Guided Conversation:

1. What is a clown?
2. Why have they been around throughout human history?
3. What do red clown noses make you think of?
4. What is one way you sometimes act like a clown?
5. Can we nominate our favorite class clown and give them a hand for making us laugh?

Main Activity

We will now create clowns based on ourselves, just like Lorenzo Pisoni does, using our actor’s toolkit (voice, body, imagination).

All great clowns start with their own bodies and movements. The clown figures out how they move, stand and laugh. Then, they take those physical gestures and make them really big and exaggerated, just like we did with the movements in our warm-up activity. Imagine what you might be like if you filled yourself with helium and laughing gas: it is the bigger-than-life version of you. That’s the clown we will discover today!

In groups of three, the students take turns helping to fit one another with a red clown nose:

1. One student sits in chair and holds a red nose in place on his or her nose with a finger.
2. Another student helps measure the elastic string around the sitting student’s head.
3. They help each other cut the string and tie it onto the nose.
4. The sitting student tries on the nose that is fastened with the string around his or her head.
5. He or she tightens or adjusts accordingly so the nose doesn’t fall off, even while jumping up and down.

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Once everyone in the group has a clown nose on their face, ask the students to take a moment to look around the room and observe how everyone looks with noses and what that feels like. Perhaps ask “What is it like to have this big red nose on your face?”

Then, it’s time to help one another find the natural, physical characteristics of our inner clown.

Demonstration

The teacher stands in front of the room in a natural way. Then he/she asks the students to observe how they are standing — how wide are my feet, are my fists clenched or relaxed, do I lean forward/backward?

Then the teacher asks the students to try to stand exactly the same way. That means trying to copy how the teacher looks as a mirror image. Everyone laughs. The teacher picks one or two students to come stand alongside him/her so the whole class can see a few model examples.

The teacher says:

“What can we do to our arms, legs, hands or head to exaggerate how I stand?”

The teacher and the volunteers make adjustments. Everyone laughs.

Back in the small groups of three, the students take turns standing with their eyes closed. The other two partners examine how the student is standing, noting where he or she places his or her feet, arms, hands, head, etc. The students try to copy the way the student with closed eyes is standing, but they get to exaggerate the posture just a little bit. When they have their poses ready, they tell the student to open his or her eyes.

The student gets to see examples of how his or her personal clown might stand and hold their posture. That original student now tries to copy the exaggerated postures of the other two students.

Repeat these steps, so the two other students get help in finding how their clown might stand.

The groups practice walking around a bit in their clown postures and physicality.

The last step is to give your own clown a name!

After 20 minutes, reconvene the class. Each group presents. All of the students introduce their clowns by striking a pose and saying “Hello, my name is _____,” using a voice that they create for their clown.

Closure

A quick group popcorn conversation to share out surprises, challenges and questions connected to creating and naming your own personal clown today.

Your Clown Story (Lesson 2)

Description

In this activity, students explore the 3 P's — People live in Places and solve lots of Problems — of the clown they created for themselves in Lesson 1.

Materials

Paper, pens/pencils, circus and clown music to underscore tableaux.

Introduction

Teacher explains that all stories have the 3 P's — even stories about clowns. Clowns all have characteristics that help them solve the problems in their world. For Lorenzo (people), his clown onstage (place) wears flippers on his feet, but is trying to climb a ladder (problem).

Now that everyone in the class has their own individual clown, let's figure out some situations that might happen to your clown!

Students return to their original groups of three.

Each student has a piece of paper with three columns. The first column is labeled "People," the second column is labeled "Places," and the third column is labeled "Problems."

The first column is easy: each group member simply writes the name of their clown under the "People" heading. The group brainstorms fun situations for each clown, one at a time. The student who created the clown fills out the remaining two columns on his or her paper. For example, a student created a clown named "Mr. Confetti Cakes." The group brainstorms places "Mr. Confetti Cakes" might wind up: a birthday party, the zoo, the shopping mall, outer space, etc. The student writes down all the ideas in the "Places" column. Then the group brainstorms the problems "Mr. Confetti Cakes" might have to solve: he got locked in the lion's cage, he's stuck on Mars, etc. The student writes down all the ideas in the "Problems" column. The group repeats for the remaining members.

Then the students each pick one place and one problem from their personal clowns' lists and write a one-sentence story — for example "Mr Confetti Cakes is in the zoo and is stuck in a lion's cage!"

The group members share their one-sentence stories in the small group. If time permits, the group works to create three frozen pictures: a beginning, middle and ending frozen picture (tableau) that illustrate each clown's one-sentence story. If time is short, each group picks one story to perform/share the three frozen pictures (tableaus).

After 30 minutes, reconvene the class. Each group presents its frozen pictures (tableaus).

Closure

In a group circle, each clown reminds us of the way he or she stands and shares a one-word check-out in his or her individual clown voice that has developed over the course of the two activities.

Clown At Heart

“...why he [my father] chose to spend his life in pursuit of humor, remains...a total mystery.”

—Lorenzo Pisoni, *Humor Abuse*

Why be in pursuit of humor?

In the pursuit of humor, what do we find or experience? Why find the funny in everyday life? Can finding what is funny in our daily lives build valuable life skills?

Finding what is funny has many benefits. It builds a positive attitude that releases endorphins, for good mental and physical health and vibrant imaginations. This leads us to rich creative processes that build strong and healthy relationships. With strong relationship-building skills come collaborative, innovative problem solving that is open-hearted, joyful and flexible. How can we not be in the pursuit of humor? Let's see if we can discover these benefits for ourselves.

Let's begin with building a positive attitude. Being able to turn around a negative or depressed perspective of a situation is a powerful life skill within each of us. Let's find out if learning to “clown around” can teach us how to transform a difficult moment.

Are We All Clowns At Heart?

Look at images of clowns from all over the world. Could this mean that the pursuit of humor and clowning is universal? Are we all clowns at heart?

Here is a link to a photo gallery of images from the Mexico City Clown Congress. These are wonderful images of the diversity of clown masks/makeup, costumes and styles:

<http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1852649,00.html>

In looking up “Clown” in different languages that use the Roman alphabet on a Smartphone translator application, they all translate “Clown” as “Clown.” Apparently, this term is universal. Try it. Look up “Clown” on a computer or a Smartphone translator application! What are your findings?

From a computer, you can go to this Google translator website to translate “clown” in different languages: <http://translate.google.com/>

From the Smartphone or computer application/website or Webster's New World hardcover dictionary, the definition is:

Origin and History for Clown: 1560s, origin is uncertain. Perhaps it comes from klonne, “clumsy person,” or less likely, from “colonist, farmer,” hence “rustic, boor,” which apparently was the earliest English sense.

Let's explore the “Klonne” part of the definition!

If you've experienced clumsy moments, you are a klonne, a clown. Clumsy behavior can be funny. Clumsy can be tragic and comic all at once — this is a classic characteristic of clowning. Clowning can put us in touch with how life can be challenging and fragile and

how humor can help us to get through it with laughter and grace.

Have you ever started laughing or coughing and clumsily started to blow milk out your nose? Then you turned and were completely surprised by a person watching you and let out an unexpected sound and reaction? Have you ever been rushing to class and you clumsily tripped and your books spilled out in front of you, and then you nearly tripped on those, too? Then your classmates started laughing and clapping for you?

Embarrassing, right? You can be humiliated and upset, or you can change your point of view and realize you have the power to be funny and turn a situation around to a positive one!

The Accidental Clown: Finding the Funny in Every Day

Skills: Discipline of repetition; collaboration; body awareness; story structure; confidence builder; building positive attitudes and outlooks; team building.

You first (Instructor). Share your examples of accidental clown moments, your clumsiest moment. Then encourage your students to do the same.

Divide your students into pairs or threesomes to share an accidental clown moment, their clumsiest moment.

Ask each pair or threesome to select one of these clumsiest moments. Using this moment, the students will build a sequence that contains all of these basic elements:

Their sequences should have this basic story structure:

1. a preparation
2. an approach
3. something must go wrong
4. a reaction to what went wrong
5. deal with it
6. a resolution or false resolution occurs (repeat 2x)
7. 3x: repeat steps 1-6
8. then, clowns believe there is a resolution, but a new conflict arises
9. an exit.

Example:

1. the person ties their shoe (preparation)
2. walks (approach)
3. trips (something must go wrong)
4. looks back at the spot where they tripped (reaction)

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5. stomps on it (deal with it)
6. repeats these steps 2x
7. then on the third time the person thinks they have avoided the trip spot and
8. passes it, then trips on a different spot.
9. Reacts, recovers, then runs off (exit).

The process of building this sequence is called **Routining**. Repeating the routine three times with a different ending for the third repetition is the comedic **magic three**.

Ask the students to get the actions of their clumsiest moment down to a routine of the story structure elements listed above. If they are missing any of the elements above, they can create or add that element. This is now a nonverbal activity.

Finishing Touches: Body postures, gestures and movements.

Now focus on creating physical characters. In their groups, students can each be different physical clown types.

Does your clown slouch or stand tall? Does your clown walk flat-footed or on tiptoe? Does your clown have a gesture when something goes wrong or when they enter or exit?

Share the routines.

If time permits, experiment with clown characters interacting and reacting with each other and/or to elements of each other's routines.

Have fun!!!!

Follow-up questions for reflection and/or discussion:

How did you feel watching the routines? How did you feel performing your routine?

How was it building your routine? How was it working with your partners?

Were you able to change your perspective about how you felt about your clumsy moment to a different point of view? Can you identify the skills that transfer to life?

Did you feel different at the end of class than you did when you started class?

Has getting to build your routines and sharing them changed the way you see your classmates?

Is the pursuit of humor worth it?

Is there freedom in finding what is funny?

Do you think Lorenzo Pisoni may have found a new point of view toward his father and his childhood after creating *Humor Abuse*?

Congratulations! You are Accidental Clowns!

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Center Theatre Group's mission is to serve the diverse audiences of Los Angeles by producing and presenting theatre of the highest caliber, by nurturing new artists, by attracting new audiences, and by developing youth outreach and education programs. This mission is based on the belief that the art of theatre is a cultural force with the capacity to transform the lives of individuals and society at large.

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