



# WILD SWAN

*T H E A T E R*

**STUDY GUIDE INFORMATION  
FOR**

**WILD SWAN THEATER'S  
PRODUCTION OF**

***DRUM ME A STORY***

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## ABOUT WILD SWAN THEATER

### MISSION STATEMENT:

*Wild Swan Theater is dedicated to producing professional theater of the highest artistic quality for families and to making that theater accessible to everyone including low income, minority and disabled children through low ticket prices and innovative outreach programs.*

### HISTORY AND ACTIVITIES:

Wild Swan Theater was founded in 1980. Since its inception, the company of professional, adult actors, dancers, musicians, visual artists, and American Sign Language interpreters has performed for hundreds of thousands of children. As well as many public performances in its home base of Ann Arbor, the company tours regularly to theaters, museums and public libraries as well as offering residencies and workshops at schools and hospitals serving disabled children statewide. This year the company will give 175 performances for an audience of over 50,000 children and their families.

Wild Swan's performance style, which incorporates storytelling and live action with puppets, masks, music and dance, has received critical acclaim as well as an enthusiastic following. The Detroit News has praised the work as "professional children's theater at its very best," and the Flint Museum of Art has described it as "superb theater that enhances life and its joys." Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village has called Wild Swan "one of the finest theaters for families in the nation."

Wild Swan has pioneered a number of audience accessibility measures for disabled individuals that are models in the state and have earned the praise of educators and health specialists across the country. All productions are performed in American Sign Language as well as spoken English with the signing completely integrated into the productions. Thus deaf children and adults not only have complete access to the productions but hearing children are exposed to this beautiful and poetic language. A program for blind individuals includes pre-performance backstage "touch tours". Participants have the opportunity to feel specially constructed props and masks, explore the set, and meet actors and hear the voices their characters will use. Audio-description, a simultaneous description of staging, lights, and costumes, transmitted electronically to participating audience members during pauses in the dialogue, permits audience members who are blind or visually impaired to have access to all the visual elements of the production. As a leader of disabled access in the state, Wild Swan has been a recipient of the Governor's Service Award in 1998 in the Arts in Service category and a grant recipient of Very Special Arts/Michigan for ten years.

Wild Swan has received major support from the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation, the Arts Foundation of Michigan, the Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs, the Elizabeth Wight and Grayling funds of the Community Foundation of Southeast Michigan, the Skillman Foundation, Newman's Own Inc., the Pistons Palace Foundation and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation.

## ABOUT THE PLAY

*Drum Me a Story* is a delightful, humorous collection of well-known African tales including *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock* and *How the Turtle Got Its Shell*. The stories are performed through storytelling, acting, and drumming by three actors who play a host of characters, changing quickly with the aid of masks and simple costume pieces. One of the actors, Ryan Edwards, is an outstanding drummer who has studied drumming in Africa over many years. Audiences will delight in his many authentic instruments including a balaphone, a djembe, and a talking drum. During the performance Ryan will demonstrate his many drums and teach the audience about them. *Drum Me a Story* is approximately 40 minutes long.

## ABOUT THE STORIES

### *How the Turtle Got Its Shell*

The story begins in the time when the turtle's back was soft and the animals' colors were not finished. In this story Nyame the Sky God wants to have a great drum to play for a festival. Osebo the Leopard had the greatest drum in the land. The Sky God tells the animals to get Osebo's drum and bring it to him. Tembo the Elephant, and Kinyanga the Ostrich each try to get Osebo's drum. Osebo frightens them away and they declare that no one can bring back the drum. To everyone's surprise Akykiegie, the little turtle says that he will go. He uses his wit and a clever trick to bring the powerful drum and Osebo the Leopard to Nyame. As a reward Akykiegie receives his lovely shell.

### *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock*

One day as Anansi is walking through the forest he discovers a very strange moss covered rock with unusual power. Upon uttering the words, "Isn't this a strange moss-covered rock", Anansi is struck senseless. He decides to use his new found knowledge to play tricks on the other animals in the forest. He leads Lion, Elephant, Rhinoceros, and many of other animals down the path to the magic rock and fools them into saying the words. While they are struck senseless, Anansi makes off with their food. But Little Bush Deer is watching and decides to turn the tables on Anansi. She gathers coconuts and waits for Anansi to come to trick her. In the end Little Bush Deer uses her wit and Anansi learns a lesson.

# MASKS

People in many cultures make and wear masks. They are used in ceremonies and dramas as well as for decorations. Sometimes masks cover the face of the wearer; other times they are worn on top of the head with the face showing. Masks are of figures important to the culture in which they are made: supernatural beings, animals, and the spirits of objects.

Sometimes the wearing of a mask is very important in a culture. The wearer is transformed into the animal or spirit of the mask he or she wears. Not all people in a community may wear the masks of supernatural beings. Other times, masks are used for more lighthearted story telling or drama and the masked figures may be tricksters or clowns. It is not uncommon for ritual and drama to be mixed together.

The kinds of masks that are made by a group of people as well as the way they are decorated help us to understand what is important in that culture. The masks of West Africa, which you will see in the play, are decorated with shells and raffia, materials that were available or could be traded for. Some use the three colors of red, black, and white. This color combination suggests change, secret knowledge, and importance and understanding.

Many kinds of masks are used in *Drum Me a Story*.

**Half masks:** Half-masks are masks that cover only part of the wearer's face. Sometimes the eyes and nose are covered, leaving the mouth visible. Othertimes, other parts of the face are covered. In *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock*, an actor wears masks that cover her eyes and nose. Half-masks have been used in theater for centuries because even though they transform the actor's face, many facial expressions can still be seen. The way the actor changes her facial features causes the mask to look different from one minute to the next.



**Rod-Masks:** Rod-masks are masks that are attached to a rod or pole that the wearer holds in her hand. The actor can become the character of the mask by holding the mask up to her face. Rod-masks can cover the whole face or just part of it. All the rod-masks in *Drum Me a Story* are large ones that cover the whole face of the actor. You will see rod-masks in *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock*. Because no part of the actors real face is showing, the expressions of the masks always stay the same. The actor has to move her head, arms, legs, and body in interesting ways to help give character to the mask

## PAPER PLATE MASKS

1. To give them a three-dimensional quality, the children cut two slits about 2" deep and 2" or 3" apart in the edge of the plate.
2. Overlapping the sides adjacent to each slit slightly and stapling them back together, forms a simple chin cup, which makes the mask fit nicely.
3. The child can locate and mark the position of his eyes and later, with the point of the scissors, make incisions for them. The teacher might illustrate methods by which the nose can be cut on the bottom and two sides and flapped out for an interesting three-dimensional quality, or how a hole might be cut in the center where the nose normally would be, or how other types of noses, such as a cone, pyramid, box, or simply a crumpled wad, can be developed from construction paper.

These first experiments in three-dimensional paper sculpture will lead to interesting improvisations for eyebrows, hair, cheeks, and ears. The teacher should encourage the children at this point to experiment with the paper in as many ways as possible and to develop the masks as a project in paper sculpture.

The child can ornament the edges of the paper with feathers, fur, cotton, or hair to get interesting effects from the type of mask he is making. Again, a scrap box with such things as raffia, yarns, shavings, and steel wool will be invaluable for suggesting new and different approaches to making masks. If these materials are not available, paint and crayons can suffice to make very interesting masks.

4. Finally, a rubber band can be stapled to each side and slipped around the child's head to hold the mask in place.

Whenever possible, the teacher ought to encourage children to be inventive by asking them to create a mood or a feeling, to make the mask look "mean" or look "sad" rather than to make it look "real."

## PAPER MACHE MASKS AND HEADS

Make a variety of masks and heads using paper mache techniques!

Materials Needed:

Round Balloon  
Newspaper  
Paper Mache Paste  
Plastic Wrap  
Paint



Instructions:

Make sure you cover you work surface well. I usually set down wax paper or plastic wrap on top of the newspaper. This is a very messy project!

Decide what size and shape of mask or head you want and choose the appropriate sized balloon. Blow up the balloon and tie it closed. Find a bowl or cup your balloon can sit in while you work on it. Completely cover the cup or bowl with plastic wrap so the paper mache does not stick to it. Also cover the table or work surface under the cup with the plastic wrap. Set your balloon in the cup or bowl and set it aside.

Tear several newspaper pages into strips. You will want them 1 inch wide and about 6 - 8 inches long. Set them aside.

Use a large bowl to prepare your paper mache paste (Pick a recipe here). The paste will be sticky! I would suggest using a bowl that is easy to soak and clean (glass perhaps) or even a disposable bowl. Now you are ready to start with the paper mache!

Dip the newspaper strips into the glue and spread them onto the balloon. Completely cover the balloon, except for the area where it is sitting in the cup. Set aside and let this first layer dry.

Once the first layer is completely dry, use various supplies to make the facial features on your balloon if desired. You can make a nose, ears, thick eye brows,lips, etc. Use cardboard, masking tape, foil, or other items shown on this supply list. Use masking tape to hold everything in place.

**Add at least two more layers of paper mache to your balloon. Allow each layer to dry completely before putting on the next layer. Once it is dry, pop the balloon and remove it through the opening left at the bottom (If you cannot get the balloon out, don't worry about it too much - No one will see it).**

**You can now paint and decorate your mask or face as desired. You can add hair using yarn, thin scraps of material, or anything else you desire.**

**To make a more realistic shaped face, make as above except use a double layer of tin foil instead of a balloon. Use your face as a mold. Have someone help you gently press the tin foil to your face to get a nice face mold. Wad up newspaper and put it inside the curved section of the foil mold and lay it on your work surface. While applying the first layer of newspaper and paste, make sure not to press on your mold too hard or it will lose its shapes!**

#### **MAKE YOUR OWN RAINFOREST RAINSTICK:**

Materials: a mailing tube (or paper toweling tubes for smaller rainsticks), packing tape, assortment of un-popped corn, sand, small stones, beads, and uncooked beans. Lots of stuff to decorate the tube: wrapping paper, markers, stickers, glue, etc.

1. Seal one end of the tube with packing tape.
2. Fill the tube with the assortment of noise making items. Fill it to about ½ inch from the top.
3. Seal the other end tightly.
4. Decorate the outside of the tube.
5. Experiment with different ways to move the tube to produce different sounds.



## About African Musical Instruments

### Dejembe:

The Dejembe is a goblet shaped, solid wood carved drum from West Africa. Originally an instrument of the Malinke people, it is now played by many ethnic groups. The top of the dejembe is covered with a shaved goat skin, which is made tight with ropes. It is traditionally hung by a strap over the drummer's shoulders, and played with the hands.



### Balafon:



The Balafon is a wooden-keyed xylophone from West Africa. Hollow gourds hang as resonators under this traditional Malinke instrument. The frame is made of bamboo and wood, lashed together with strips of animal hide. The balafon keys are carefully tuned blocks of wood, struck with rubber-tipped mallets. This instrument has evolved into many different styles and shapes throughout the continent of Africa.

### Dununs:

The family of bass drums from the Malinke culture is called dununs. They are also individually named Kenkeni-smallest, Sangban-medium and Dununba-largest. The dununs are hollow cylinder-shaped, hollow carved pieces of wood. They are strung with cow skin on each side and tensioned with rope. They often will have a small metal bell tied to its side. The dununs are struck with a wooden beater.



Information and pictures courtesy of Ryan Edwards

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Anansi is smaller and weaker than the animals and the fairy that he tricks. How does he outwit them without needing to be big and strong. Do you know other stories where someone small outwitted a bigger or stronger opponent?

Anansi plays many tricks on the other animals. How many tricks can you remember?

At the end of *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock*, Anansi is only sad for a minute. Why do you think he gets happy again?

Why does Little Bush Deer decide to turn the tables on Anansi. Do you remember a time when you saw someone play a trick on another person. How did you feel?

We never find out what the magic of the moss-covered rock is. Use your imagination to explain how the rock causes people to fall over.

What other stories, from other cultures as well as our own, have a trickster character?

## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Make masks (rod or half masks) as part of telling or performing a story.

There are a lot of different animals represented in the stories. Try moving like one of the animals (i.e. a turtle, an elephant, an ostrich) from the stories or other animals you think of on your own. Do they move quickly or slowly? Are they tall or low to the ground? Once you have a movement for your animal(s), try finding a "voice" for them. Would they speak in a low voice or a high one?

Ask the class to each memorize a short poem or story. Take turns reciting the poem/story in as many different ways as possible. For example, one person could tell the poem boldly, another could sing the lines, etc.

Have one student tell a short story. Take turns re-telling the story and observe how the story changes with telling. Another variation may be telling the story adding as much color as possible. A narrates: "I walked down the street" . B retells: "I walked down the golden street."

Pass around an object, such as a ruler or piece of cloth. Ask the students to imagine what else it might be. For example, a ruler might be a magic wand, or a balance beam, or a shovel, etc.

Listen to sounds made by instruments or objects in the classroom. Discuss how sounds suggest things that may be happening in the story, or can be used to inspire a story.

In *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock*, there are a lot of repetitive phrases used when Anansi leads his animal friends to a “certain” place. Discuss how the repetition affects the listener. For Upper Elementary students: Try writing a story where either rhythms or phrases are repeated.

Make up a new ending for one of the stories. For example: What if Osebo didn’t fall for Anansi’s trick of getting into the drum?

Grow a sweet potato by placing it in a bowl or glass of water. Use three tooth picks to hold it in place in the container, so that only about a fourth of it is immersed in the water.

Cook yams and taste. Discuss ways food helps us learn about a culture.

## SWAHILI WORDS FOUND IN THE STORIES

Jambo (JAHM-boh)	A greeting; hello
Osebo (oh-SAY-boh)	Leopard
Nyame (NYAH-may)	Sky God
Kinokero (kee-noh-KAY-roh)	Antelope
Tembo (TEM-boh)	Elephant
Kinyanga (kin-YAHN-guh)	Ostrich
Akykiegie (A-kee-kee-uh-GEE-uh)	Turtle

## SUGGESTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock**, retold by Eric A. Kimmel; Holiday House – New York, 1988

**The Leopard's Drum**, Jessica Souhami

**A Story - A Story**, An African tale retold and illustrated by Gail E. Haley; Atheneum - New York, 1970

### OTHER AFRICAN STORIES:

**Bimwili and the Zimwi: A Tale From Zanzibar**, Verna Aardema; Dial Books For Young Readers, 1985

**The Lonely Lioness and the Ostrich Chicks: A Masai Tale**, Verna Aardema; A.A. Knopf, Distributed by Random House, 1996

**Once Upon a Time Tales From Africa**, Misoso; A.A. Knopf, Distributed by Random House, 1994

### Web Resources

<http://www.noteaccess.com/MATERIALS/MatMaskMaking.htm>

<http://familycrafts.about.com/cs/makingmasks/>

<http://www.likewaterdrumworks>