

Study Guide for Redmoon Theater's

Laika's Coffin: A Suitcase Opera

By Sarah Rose Graber

Every spring, the Chicago Humanities Festival offers **Stages, Sights, and Sounds**, a mix of the best theater, music, dance, puppetry, and visual art the world has to offer. 2010 features three international companies making their Chicago debuts: Scotland's Visible Fictions, Israel's The Galilee Multicultural Theatre, and France's Vélo Théâtre. Two Chicagoans, Frank Maugeri of Redmoon Theater and beatboxer/vocal percussionist Yuri Lane, treat us to brand-new work. At the audience's request, we also welcome back Leah Mann and Ela Lamblin, the dynamic duo behind Lelavision, whose stunning physicality and musical sculptures made it the runaway hit of the 2008 festival.

We have prepared study guides for each of the 2010 performances. These materials will help teachers ready their classes for the 2010 **Stages, Sights, and Sounds** and provide activities and ideas to explore with students long after the Festival is over.

ABOUT THE CHICAGO HUMANITIES FESTIVAL

The Chicago Humanities Festival (CHF) creates year-round opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and economic circumstances to explore, enjoy, and support the arts and humanities. We accomplish this by presenting programs throughout the year, culminating in two annual Festivals of the Humanities, one in the spring specifically for children and families and one in the fall for the general public. The CHF's mission of providing broad access to the humanities – at a low ticket price – depends in part on the generosity of its most committed and enthusiastic supporters.

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Lesson Plan:

Laika's Coffin

Redmoon Theater

Laika's Coffin: A Suitcase Opera is Redmoon's artistic director, Frank Maugeri's production of an epic tale based on the biography of the doomed first animal in space. Soviet scientists and cosmonauts kidnap Laika, an old lady's dog, and send the poor pooch on a space mission that will shorten its life yet give it a unique view of the universe. In the show, five suitcases open to reveal remarkable miniature Soviet-inspired sets while an operatic narrator, three puppeteers, and a full chorus animate the melancholy saga.

Links to performance excerpts, information about Redmoon, and background information about the first dog sent into space can be found in the works cited section.

BIOGRAPHY

Redmoon was founded in 1990 to promote a unique brand of performance committed to the highest-quality artistic product and to civic well-being. Pulling with conviction from contemporary art forms and ancient theatrical forms, Redmoon has created a performance style that is equal parts pageantry, gadgetry, acrobatics, and ephemera.

Over the past decade Redmoon has garnered international attention for theatrical productions like *Hunchback* and site-specific performances, which have been seen everywhere in Chicago from the Jackson Park Lagoon to the façade of Museum of Contemporary Art. Over recent years, Redmoon has expanded to include projects in Holland, Ireland, France, and Australia. Redmoon is committed to creating unexpected theater in unexpected locations.

STAGES SIGHTS & SOUNDS

CONTENTS

In this guide you'll find:

- Two lesson plans recommended for 4th and 5th grades.
- Each activity will take 10–15 minutes
- These activities will prepare students to attend the 2010 production of ***Laika's Coffin: A Suitcase Opera*** by Redmoon or can be used in response to the what they see during **Stages, Sights, and Sounds**.

ACTIVITY: EMOTIONAL CHORUS

Purpose: *Laika's Coffin* is a story told through song, specifically through a chorus. Expressing emotion is often connected to a vocal sound. This activity will give students the opportunity to create an atmosphere of emotion through their sounds.

Time Frame: 15 minutes

Lesson Plan:

- o Assemble about eight (8) students in front of you. 4 will be in the first row on their knees and four (4) more students will be in the second row standing up.
- o As the teacher, you will be the conductor of the orchestra.
- o Give the students a theme in which to come up with sounds. (i.e.: Love, anger, confusion, etc)
- o One at a time, you will point to a student to create his own sound from that theme that he can repeat. (i.e.: if the example were "confusion", you would point to a student and they might say, "What? What? What? What?")
- o Bring your hand into a fist shape to signal for them to stop their sound.
- o Then add in multiple students at once (i.e.: "What? Umm? Huh? What? Umm? Huh?")
- o The sounds will overlap and can build into a cacophony of sound.
- o Raise your arms up to raise the volume
- o Bring your arms down to lower the volume

ACTIVITY: SOUND EFFECTS

Purpose: In *Laika's Coffin*, physical actions done by the puppets will be accompanied with a sound effect. This is done to create atmosphere, punctuate a moment, or heighten emotional response to an action. In this exercise, students will make sound effects to learn about the way sound can be used a tool for storytelling.

Time Frame: 10 minutes

Lesson Plan:

- o Break the class up into partners.
- o Ask the students to think of a simple everyday action (i.e.: brushing your teeth, making a sandwich, looking for something in your backpack, etc)
- o Then have one student mime the actions while the other student creates the sound effects to accompany those movements.
- o After the students have mimed the scenario with the sound effects, ask them to switch roles so that the person who originally did sound effects is now miming the action and vice versa.

DIGGING DEEPER:

Writing Exercise: Ask students to consider the following: If you were given the opportunity, like Laika, to travel through space and gain a whole new perspective on the world, but knew it would shorten your life span, would you do it? Why or why not?

WORKS CITED

Redmoon Theater:

<http://www.redmoon.org>

Performance excerpt from *Laika's Coffin*:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTSEDUPywZc>

More information on constructing puppets:

<http://42explore.com/puppet.htm>

Additional background information about Laika, the first dog in space:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laika>