

A Perfect Balance

A Performance Guide for Teachers

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A Perfect Balance is a multi-media theatre performance that explores and celebrates the artistic process. We follow Sandy, an artist/inventor, on a journey to find his masterpiece. The play, which integrates music, movement, text, puppetry and visual art, celebrates the sometimes rocky road of discovery – of creating something that is wholly new and wholly your own. We hope *A Perfect Balance* will inspire your students to make connections between Sandy's inventive journey and their own creative endeavors.

Following the 45 minute performance there will be a 10-minute discussion/
demonstration

The Story:

Sandy wants to capture in his art “the way he sees the world.” Sandy’s father, also an artist, challenges him to create a “masterpiece.” At first, Sandy studies the work of other artists, trying to imitate what has been done before. But Sandy loves movement more than anything so he wants to make his art “move.” He begins by creating several figures for a miniature circus – Monsieur Loyal, the ringmaster and Fioni Flipponi, a daring trapeze acrobat. These figures come to life to encourage him to reach even further – to take greater risks on his journey to find his own kind of art

Sandy plays with many ideas – a seal sculpture that can clap (but only when Sandy animates it), colors on a canvas that can dance (but only in Sandy’s imagination) and shapes floating off the page (but only when Sandy moves them). With each unsuccessful attempt, Sandy doubts his abilities more and more. His “critic” (an internal voice that he gives shape and form to through an amusing sculpture) gets louder and louder. Finally, Sandy decides to start all over and escapes to the sea on an imaginary boat.

From his boat Sandy begins to see the world in a whole new way filled with movements as large as the planets, the churning of the waves and the patterns of the clouds. He returns to his studio to try once more, but his voices of doubt overtake him and he rips his final drawing into tiny pieces, hurling them into the air. From his “mistake” Sandy discovers the key to capturing his own exuberant vision of the world – a high flying, trapeze sculpture...*the mobile*.

“When you no longer know which way to go, perhaps your journey has begun.”

Fioni Flipponi

“Can I capture the way the universe moves?”

Sandy

“A mobile captures genuine living movements and shapes them. They are at once lyrical inventions, technical combinations of an almost mathematical quality and sensitive symbols of nature.”

Alexander Calder

A Perfect Balance is a fantasy inspired by the work of American Artist Alexander Calder (1898 – 1976), the inventor of the mobile. While not a biography of Calder, the play is based on the spirit of play and invention that filled Calder’s life and art. Introducing your students to Calder’s work prior to the performance is an exciting possibility, but not a necessary component to their enjoyment or understanding of the play.

About Alexander Calder:

Alexander Calder is one of the best-known and most beloved sculptors of the 20th century. He became famous for his witty and elegant sculptures called **mobiles**. The works received this name because they actually move when pushed by air currents. Earlier sculptors had given movement to sculpture but by using motors or clockworks. Calder's mobiles are delicately suspended abstract constructions of sheet metal parts and wire.

Calder was born in Philadelphia. His father and grandfather were sculptors and his mother was a painter. He first studied to be an engineer, but then moved to Paris in 1926 to study art. His earlier work included miniature circus and wire sculptures. In 1932, he began creating his mobiles. He is also known for his large sculptures, called stabiles, some of which have moving parts. He also designed rugs, jewelry, toys and painted the outside of airplanes! His work can be seen in public spaces throughout the world.

The following activities will enhance the learning potential from your class's seeing of *A Perfect Balance*. All can be adapted for a variety of age levels.

Vocabulary:

Line	Detail	Spectacular
Shape	Extraordinary	Movement
Color	Balance	Capture
Trapeze	Tight-rope	Masterpiece
Mobile	Artist	Still-life
Landscape	Portrait	Diagonal
Horizontal	Vertical	Critic

Concepts explored in *A Perfect Balance*:

Creativity	Balance
Difference between work and play	Risk taking
Interconnectedness	Transformation
Capturing an idea in art	Success from failure

Pre-Performance activities:

- Look at different kinds of art (reproductions in books or on-line or visit a museum). Compare drawings, paintings, sculptures. How are they alike? How are they different?
- What do you think an artist feels when he or she is creating? How do **you** feel when you are making art?
- Talk about the circus. What kind of performers do you find there? What kind of music? Why do you think people like the circus?
- If you wanted to make art that could move, what would you make?
- Look at books about Alexander Calder's art. Discover how much he experimented. Look at the variety of mediums in which he worked.

You may want to keep the final moment in the performance – the creation of a giant mobile – a surprise!

Post-Performance discussion:

- What did Sandy have to discover before he could create his masterpiece?
- What was Sandy's relationship to each of the other characters in the play – the ringmaster, Fioni-of-the-flying-trapeze, the critic, his father? Who encouraged him? Do you have voices inside your head that encourage/discourage you? Try drawing them or making figures of them like Sandy did!
- How is the final mobile different from everything else that Sandy creates in the play? How does the mobile make you feel when you look at it? What would you name it?

Post-Performance activities:

- Sandy was very excited by shape, color and line. Create a drawing or painting in which you use only one shape, one color and one kind of line (straight, curved, zigzag). Why did you choose that shape, color and line? Try another using two shapes, two colors and two lines. Compare what the two pictures communicate.

- The theatre artists who created *A Perfect Balance* were inspired by looking at the artwork of Alexander Calder. Do you “see” a story in a piece of art? Look at a painting. If there are people in the picture, imagine who they are, what their personalities might be. Do a dramatic improvisation based on the moment captured in the painting. What was happening right before, right after?
- Sandy in the play (and Alexander Calder in real life) created a miniature circus. As a class, create your own circus, building figures out of clay, paper, wire and string. Can you make your figures balance on tightropes, swing on trapezes, spring off a platform? What do you discover about motion, weight, force and balance (**that’s physics!**) to make your circus come to life?
- Write a letter to Sandy, telling him what you think about his final “masterpiece”.
- Write a newspaper article about a visit to Sandy’s art studio. What do you think you would find there? What materials? Imagine interviewing Sandy about his art and ideas.
- Make a mobile to illustrate “balanced” equations. Suspend pieces of papers with numbers off either end of a straw. Connect the pieces of paper with string. Put lots of numbers on one side to equal one or two numbers on the other. Now, can you make the mobile balance by adjusting the sizes of your paper pieces?

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