

Underground
Railway
Theater



The Firebird
and
Till Eulenspiegel's
Merry Pranks



Study Guide

About Underground Railway Theater



Underground Railway Theater (URT) creates dynamic connections between high-quality professional theater and community. Combining actors, puppetry and music, URT engages diverse audiences with theater of social content and great visual beauty - theater that challenges and delights, informs and celebrates.

URT was founded in 1979 in Oberlin, Ohio, one of the last stops on the Midwestern branch of the Underground Railroad. The company took its name from this chapter in American history, carrying on in a spirit of hope, community, and the envisioning of change.

Past work includes performances with major orchestras throughout the country, collaborations with museums, residencies at the Smithsonian Institute, and appearances at Lincoln Center, Arena Stage and the Kennedy Center, as well as performances in France, Spain, Taiwan and Hong Kong. URT also has a long-standing science theater partnership with Massachusetts Institute of Technology – Catalyst Collaborative @ MIT.

URT is one of two Resident Theater Companies at the Central Square Theater in Cambridge, MA, along with the Nora Theater Company. Central Square Theater has an ongoing student matinee series with discount prices for school groups.

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MA Curriculum Connections

The questions and activities in this Study Guide connect with many of the MA Curriculum Frameworks. The following list is a sampling of standards that connect with the lessons in this guide. These standards are taken from the Massachusetts Department of Education Curriculum Frameworks (www.doe.mass.edu).

Theater Arts Curriculum Frameworks

In THEATER, students will:

- Attend live performances of extended length and complexity, demonstrating an understanding of the protocols of audience behavior appropriate to the style of the performance

In CONNECTING ART TO OTHER DISCIPLINES, students will:

- Describe the purposes for which works of dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and architecture were and are created, and, when appropriate, interpret their meanings.
- Demonstrate their understanding of styles, stylistic influence, and stylistic change by identifying when and where art works were created, and by analyzing characteristic features of art works from various historical periods, cultures, and genres.

English Language Arts, Literacy and History Frameworks

In HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE, students will:

- Acquire the ability to frame questions that can be answered by historical study and research; by comparing historical narratives, they will differentiate historical fact from historical interpretation and from fiction.

In ENGLISH, students will:

- Deepen their understanding of a literary or non-literary work by relating it to its contemporary context or historical background.

Get Ready:

Attending a Live Performance

Attending a live show is a unique experience. Going to see a play can be a great opportunity for students, but there is a lot of responsibility that goes with it. In a play, the performers are live onstage in front of the audience. This means they can hear (and sometimes see) the audience. How you react as an audience member affects what the actors do onstage. Because of this, the audience is often considered another character in the show.

Teachers: Before you come to the theater, please talk with your students about seeing a play and what is expected of them during a live show. Here are some important etiquette points to remember when going to the theater:

- There is no food, candy or gum allowed in the theater.
- Cell phones, mp3 players and other electronic devices should be turned off and put away for the performance.
- During the performance students should focus their energy and attention on the action happening onstage.

We encourage you to use the questions below to have a conversation with your students about attending the theater:

- Have you ever performed in front of an audience in a play, dance performance, concert or sporting event? What about doing a report or presentation in school? Do you enjoy doing this? Why or why not?
- How aware were you of the audience and their reactions during your performance? How did their presence affect your performance?
- Can you imagine (or have you experienced) performing in front of an audience that was clearly not interested in what you were sharing? How did you know? Did this affect your performance/presentation?

After the show, students will have a chance to talk with the actors in the production and ask them questions about the show. Ask students to write down some possible questions they could ask, using the prompts below:

- What is one question you have about the show before you see it?
- What is one question you might ask a performer in the production?
- What is one question you might ask the director of the show?
- What is one question you might ask one of the designers (lighting designer, puppet designer)?

Get Ready:

The Creation of Symphonies in Shadow: *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* and *The Firebird*

- Underground Railway Theater was asked by the Boston Symphony Orchestra to create puppet spectacles to two wonderful pieces of music – Igor Stravinsky's **ballet suite** *The Firebird*, and Richard Strauss' symphonic **tone poem** *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*.

What is a ballet suite? *A short piece of music written from the music of a full ballet score.*

What is a symphonic tone poem? *A piece of orchestral music in which the content of a poem, a story, a painting, a landscape or another non-musical source is illustrated or evoked.*

- We decided to use **shadow puppetry**, because its play of light and shadow and color seemed to us closer to the qualities of music than other kinds of puppetry, such as hand puppets or rod puppets. Shadow puppetry is mysterious and poetic, and shadow puppetry can move to music with a freedom that other puppets don't have. Shadow puppetry seems to us a wonderful way to visualize music. It is interesting that one of the most ancient forms of shadow puppetry, in Indonesia, is always performed with an orchestra: a gamelan orchestra, made of drums and bells and gongs.

What is a shadow puppetry? *Puppeteers behind a screen use two-dimensional puppets and lights to cast shadows seen by the audience in front. Some shadow puppets are **opaque**: no light passes through them, so they cast a black shadow. Some shadow puppets are **translucent** and are colorfully painted: light passes through casting colors on the screen, like stained glass come to life.*

- We created our own stories based on the music and the stories that the music seemed to be telling. We also researched the many Russian **folk tales** about the Firebird and German folk tales about the famous trickster, Till Eulenspiegel.

What is a folk tale? *A story passed on by word of mouth. This means that the stories change over many re-tellings before they are written down, so there are many versions of the same story. Sometimes a folk tale is based on a real event, and often they involve fantastic creatures and magic.*

Deepen Understanding: *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*

Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks is a tone poem about the famous **trickster** from German folklore, Till Eulenspiegel. Now, who was this Till Eulenspiegel? There were probably several real people who went into the making of Till's legend, all living in Northern Europe about 700 years ago. There are lots of stories about Till, and it is not easy to figure out which ones Richard Strauss, the composer, had in mind when writing his tone-poem in Germany, in 1894. He was pretty cagey about it, and it was only when a musician friend pleaded with Strauss to tell him the story behind the music that the composer finally scribbled down a few of his ideas in the margins of his friend's musical score. Those are our only clues to the composer's intentions, other than the music itself.

Ask: What is a trickster? *A god, goddess, spirit, man, woman, or animal who plays tricks or disobeys normal rules. Often tricksters have a positive impact, even if they cause a lot of trouble. A trickster might break rules to teach a lesson, or to help someone who is weak and powerless to overcome being treated unfairly by someone more powerful.*

Ask: What tricksters do you know? In stories? In life?

Underground Railway Theater's shadow-puppet version of Till's adventures is a kind of salad made up of the old Till stories, finely chopped, Strauss' scribbles in his friend's score, liberally seasoned, and our own house dressing. The main item on the menu is the music, which tells the story in its own special and gorgeous way.

Ask: What pieces of music do you know that tell a story?

Pre-Show Activity:

Listen to *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* in advance of Underground Railway Theater's performance.

Ask: What do you notice about the music? How does it make you feel? What does it make you think of? What instruments and musical themes stand out for you? What do you hear happening in the music? What story can you imagine the music telling?

Do: Listen to the music again. Draw or paint as you listen to the music. What colors and pictures do you hear? What is *your* interpretation of the music?

Possible Post-Show Activity:

After seeing Underground Railway Theater's performance, you might want to listen to Till Eulenspiegel again, and listen for the story you saw in the music. Here is the story URT told, connected to some of the musical themes you heard. Perhaps you will be able to see how URT came to create their story - their interpretation of Richard Strauss' *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*.

**Underground Railway Theater's *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*,
based on the symphonic tone poem by Richard Strauss**

Till is introduced with his two musical themes right away. The first, in the french horn, introduces a hero of daring adventures. Till's other theme, in the clarinet, introduces the sassy trickster, who thumbs his nose at all self-important stuffed shirts.

In the first scene, we see Till as the poor skinny servant of a rich fat merchant. The merchant has just bought himself a juicy pie, and Till, being hungry, asks for a proverbial 'piece of the pie'. But the Merchant just bangs him on the head, instead. Till takes matters into his own hands. The pie, for instance, and the Merchant's horse, which he uses for his getaway, galloping through the marketplace.

Till is munching contentedly on his pie, when in swoops an owl. The owl will become his lifelong friend, but now he teases Till by stealing the stolen pie. Till clammers up a tree after the owl and looks down just in time to see a fat friar come lumbering through the woods to a sneaky theme in the cellos.

This particular friar is a phony. Some local poor people come to him, asking for forgiveness for their sins, but instead of giving them pardons, he sells them haloes - a pretty greasy friar. Till gives him a taste of justice Robin Hood - style, taking from the rich and giving to the poor, and is congratulating himself when in waltz two gorgeous washerwomen enter to a hip-swinging theme in the violas and the bassoons.

This time the trickster gets tricked. Till falls in love with both of the washerwomen at the same time. He shows off for them, but they just laugh. You can hear Till in the violins, and the laughter of the washerwomen in the brass.

The Washerwomen reward Till with an uplifting experience he is not likely to forget, and leave him licking his wounds. But his self pity is interrupted when two eggheads come bouncing in. These know-it-all professors enter the scene to a pompous hopping figure in the bass clarinet and double bassoon.

Till decides to ask these eggheads the Big Question. (You get to fill in with your own favorite Big Question.) But all he gets for an answer is a lot of hot air. So, with a little help from his friend, the Owl, Till teaches them a lesson or two, and he and the Owl go skipping off in triumph together to a silly little tune.

At this point in his tone-poem, Richard Strauss, the composer, scribbled "wilder and wilder pranks" into the margin of his score. This is when Till Eulenspiegel lives up to his full name, which means "owl" and "mirror" in German. So, at this point in the story, the Owl brings Till a fortune-telling mirror, and sets him up as a fortune-teller in a carnival. His magic mirror reflects people as they truly are, on the inside. The truth gets Till into a lot of trouble fast - because who comes to see themselves in Till's magic truth-telling mirror but local big shots - a hot-headed general, a very proud and vain woman, and (from the first scene) the rich and selfish merchant, who raises the hue and cry, and before you know it, we're into the Big Chase Scene! Till is caught, and brought to trial. You can hear his judges' accusations in the orchestra, and Till the Trickster's attempts to defend himself in the clarinet. Till is sentenced, and punished. But, as you can hear from Richard Strauss' wonderful music, it is impossible to extinguish a trickster's spirit!

Deepen Understanding:

About Firebird

The young Russian composer Igor Stravinsky was asked in 1909 to write a **ballet** based on Russian folklore about the fabulous Firebird. He was very surprised, since he was just getting started in his career. But he was excited to create a piece with the Ballets Russes (Russian Ballet) in Paris. The first performance of *The Firebird* was given by Diaghilev's ballet company almost exactly 100 years ago: June 25th, 1910. Its success was overwhelming!

Ask: Have you ever seen a ballet? What was the title, the story? What stood out for you about the dance? The music?

When Fokine, the choreographer for the Ballets Russes, came to design the story for his version of the ballet, he combined several of the hundreds of folktales about the Firebird with other stories about Kastchei, a famous evil wizard in Russian folklore, and Ivan (Russian for John), a young hero. Stravinsky wrote:

Russian legends have as heroes characters that are simple... devoid of all malice... and it is they who are always victorious over characters who are... cruel and powerful... Ivan is enabled to overcome Kastchei because he yielded to pity... through pity he acquired power to free the world from the wickedness of Kastchei.

In setting out to tell their version of the story, artists from the Underground Railway Theater tried to give a central role to the pity of which Stravinsky wrote. In URT's version of the story, Ivan – in this story a boy – meets the Firebird while he is hunting, and hurts it. He feels regret for what he has done and **compassion** for the Firebird, and that gives him the power to deal with the wizard Kastchei.

Ask: Have you ever hurt someone or something, and felt regret and compassion? What do we mean by 'compassion'? What happened to you afterwards? Did you feel changed at all? If so, how?

Stravinsky composed a shorter version of *The Firebird* for concert performances – *The Firebird Suite*. Underground Railway Theater performs its version of *The Firebird* to Stravinsky's 1919 suite.

Pre-Show Activity:

Listen to the music of *The Firebird Suite* in advance of Underground Railway Theater's performance.

Ask: Listen to these quotes from Stravinsky. What additional thoughts do they give you about the music?

Composing, for me, is putting into an order a certain number of sounds according to certain interval – relationships. This activity leads to a search for the center upon which the series of sounds involved in my undertaking should converge.

I have always had a horror of listening to music with my eyes shut, with nothing for them to do... all music created demands some exteriorization for the perception of the listener.

Melody is the most essential of the elements of music.

It is interesting that Stravinsky says that melody is the most important element of music, since George Balanchine, the great choreographer who worked with Stravinsky for 30 years, said:

As an organizer of **rhythms**, Stravinsky has been more subtle and various than any single creator in history... In his music, the dance element of most force is the pulse....

Ask: What stands out for you most in the Firebird? The melody? Or the rhythms? Why? How would you describe what you heard? What do you hear happening in the music? What story can you imagine the music telling?

Do: Listen to the music again. Draw, paint, or move as you listen to the music. What colors and pictures do you hear? What movements do you hear? What is *your* interpretation of the music?

Possible Post-Show Activity:

After seeing Underground Railway Theater's performance, you might want to listen to *The Firebird* again, and listen in the music for the story you saw. Here is Underground Railway Theater's story, connected to movements in the score.

**Underground Railway Theater's
The Firebird, Ivan, and Kastchei the Indestructible,
based on *The Firebird* by Igor Stravinsky**

1. *Introduction*

a. *Kastchei's Enchanted Garden*

Listen. Here is the garden. Somewhere here is Kastchei, the Wizard. Can you hear his footsteps? Into the garden stumbles the boy Ivan, hunting with his bow and arrows.

b. *Dance of the Firebird*

Suddenly the great Firebird appears, lured by Kastchei's Tree of Golden Apples. Ivan chases the Firebird, and the Firebird teases him, flying here and there, all over the garden. Without thinking, Ivan shoots an arrow into the Firebird.

c. *Rondelay*

His heart sinks as he sees that he has hurt her. Just as its spirit is about to leave its body, Ivan swears to never again use his bow and arrow on another living creature. The Firebird's spirit returns to its body, and it gives a feather to the boy, before disappearing into the sun from where it came. Ivan is puzzled. Is the feather just a gift? Or is it to help him in some way?

2. *The Infernal Dance*

The great wizard Kastchei has been watching all this time. He, too, has wanted such a feather for many years, to gain complete mastery over the sun. And now, enraged that a *boy* has been given the feather, he calls on his army of little monsters, the Bobolichki, to attack! Ivan is caught, and it seems like the end for the boy, but just then he notices that Kastchei is fascinated by the Firebird's feather. The boy waves the feather hypnotically, and the Wizard begins to fall asleep. Ivan creeps out of the Wizard's grasp, but just as he is about to escape, he sees the wizard's ice palace, made up of the frozen bodies of his victims! The boy is filled with compassion for the Kastchei's victims. What can he do? In his sorrow, he drops his magic feather, and the icy breath of Kastchei, powerful even in his sleep, begins to surround the boy. Ivan feels his heart beat grow slower and slower, until he, too, is turned into a pillar of solid ice.

3. *Lullaby*

Ivan's compassion for the frozen victims does not go unnoticed. The feather begins to glow like the sun itself, and brings Ivan back to life. He gently touches the victims of the palace with his magic feature, and they come back to life, with color and movement returning to their bodies.

4. *Finale*

The spirit of the firebird melts Kastchei's coldness away, and she magically reappears out of her glowing feather and returns to Ivan's side as the music ends.

Reflect and Connect:

Write a Review

After your students have seen the show, ask them to be theater critics and write a review. Here are some questions you can use as prompts in your writing:

- What was for you the most compelling or intriguing aspect of the production?
- What questions do you have about the performance? What would you like to know more about?
- Can you make any connections between this performance and other performances you have seen? Between the performance and books you have read? Between the performance and something from your own life? Compare and contrast the play to these other stories.
- If you could speak with the puppeteers, the director or with one of the composers, what would you ask? say? What are some things you would discuss?

We love to hear from you! If your students have written a review of the show or generated any other work based on their experiences of Underground Railway Theater, please send work to us. We will write you back!

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