

Air Play

Acrobuffos

Air Play is a collaboration between Acrobuffos and a kinetic sculptor, Daniel Wurtzel



Resource developed by Julie Martin 2023 with supporting material from Christina Gelsone and Seth Bloom

Images: Florence Montmare

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Youth & Education Program Partners



Overview.



Warnings

Recommended for ages 5+
(Reception – Year 12)

Duration

1hr no interval

Duration

Festival Theatre

Themes

Curiosity
Wonder
Magic
Allusion

Synopsis

Air Play is a circus-style adventure of two siblings journeying through a surreal land of air as they transform ordinary objects into uncommon beauty. Using simple materials, movement, and modest technology. Seth Bloom and Christina Gelsone create a magical space where umbrellas fly, fabrics soar over the audience, balloons swallow people, and snow swirls, filling the stage.

Genre

Comedy/Circus

In circus, an acrobat must be able to do difficult tricks: an acrobat does not pretend to do a handstand the way an actor pretends to be a character. Likewise, clowns do not pretend the audience is not there. Instead, clowns look right at the audience, and often go into the audience.

One of the biggest tricks in a clown's bag is looking at the audience and sharing their emotional reaction with the public. It is one thing to put your hand in the cookie jar. It is quite a different thing to put your hand in the cookie jar and then look up and realize someone is watching you. That 'uh-oh!' moment - if the audience can see it - is what is funny.

Production.

Styles and Conventions

Physical Theatre/Circus/Visual Poem

Air Play has no words. It is part comedy, part sculpture, part circus, part theatre. Christina and Seth invite the audience to think of it as a visual poem, a world that lets you make your own ideas inside of large "air sculptures" of flying fabric, umbrellas and balloons. Though it looks simple, *Air Play* is very detailed and takes a lot more work than what you just see on stage.

Physical theatre puts the human body at the centre of the storytelling process

It relies on the performers' physical motion to convey the story. Performers can communicate through various body gestures (including using the body to portray emotions).

Most staged plays are written by a playwright and then rehearsed by a director. However, since the mid-1950s, there has been a new kind of theatre that is made by hands-on experimentation and created by an ensemble of performers. This is called devised theatre. *Air Play* is an example of devised work.

It took months of experimenting and brainstorming between the clowns and the sculptor to develop enough new sculptures to use in a full-length show, and then more rehearsal to find out how the performers could interact with the sculptures. Only at the end of the process was the story made. Quite the opposite of most theatre development, where the story comes first.

Set & Costume Design

The set is minimalist and elemental, using air as the primary dramatic device. The silent clowns of the Acrobuffos made *Air Play* in collaboration with the kinetic sculptor Daniel Wurtzel, whose sculptures are seen in museums all over the world. Seven of the eight kinetic sculptures in the show are unique to *Air Play*. The two characters and their props are in primary colours. Though the two performers are silent clowns, they do not wear traditional clown makeup.

Air Play has invented fan systems to control the sculptures.

Sound

This is a non-verbal performance, accompanied by a pre-recorded soundtrack.

Technical

With the use of large fans on stage, movement and technology are combined to move objects in harmony with the performers.

ac•ro•buf•fo

[akrə bōōfō] noun

1. a silent comic actor creating spectacular feats of laughter



Fun Facts.

- *Air Play's* director, West Hyler, has worked with Cirque du Soleil, Jersey Boys and Big Apple Circus.
- *Air Play's* technical director, Todd Little, managed a record-breaking hot air balloon that travelled half-way around the world! His balloon module is now in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.
- *Air Play's* stage manager, Flora Vassar, controls all the lights, sounds, and fans simultaneously. She has over 250 cues and is considered the third 'performer' in the show.
- Seth and Daniel went to the same university, Wesleyan. Lin-Manuel Miranda, the creator of *Hamilton*, was a fellow student at Wesleyan with Seth.
- *Air Play* uses over 200 feet (60m) of fabric, longer than four school buses.
- *Air Play* uses 67 balloons each show.
- While *Air Play* looks light, the entire show weighs 1,675 pounds, which is about 760kg!
- *Air Play* has travelled around the world on a plane, a truck, a van and a boat.
- Climbing inside the giant balloons is the most dangerous part of the show. They bring a sharp object to pop them in case of an emergency. It also gets very hot inside the balloons.





Curriculum Links.

The Australian Curriculum: Drama

This education resource has been developed with links to the Australian Curriculum. Activities have been created to reflect each of the achievement standards, depending on the year level, including content descriptions within each learning area and the general capabilities. The resource aims to provide teachers with information to help prepare students before attending the performance, as well as structured learning activities for the classroom after viewing the performance.

General Capabilities

The Arts Learning Area has a natural link to the elements of the General Capabilities. Specific learning activities have been linked with the following icons:



Literacy



Critical and Creative Thinking



Ethical Understanding



Personal and social capability



Numeracy

Dance (Foundation to Year 10)

Creating and Making

Elements of Dance – Space, time, dynamics, and relationships.

- Use play, imagination, arts knowledge, processes and/or skills to discover possibilities and develop ideas (**AC9ADAFD01**)
- Experiment with ways to move safely and expressively using fundamental movement skills and the elements of dance (**AC9ADA2D01**)
- Use the elements of dance to choreograph dance that communicates ideas, perspectives and/or meaning (**AC9ADA4C01**)
- Manipulate the elements of dance and/or choreographic devices to choreograph dances that communicate ideas, perspectives and/or meaning (**AC9ADA6C01**)
- Apply technical and expressive skills and/or genre- or style-specific techniques to communicate ideas, perspectives and/or meaning (**AC9ADA8C02** & **AC9ADA10C02**)

Science: Physical Sciences

- Describe how objects move and how factors including their size, shape or material influence their movement exploring how different strengths of pushes and pulls affect the movement of objects (**AC9SFU02**)
- Investigating the effect of forces on the behaviour of an object through actions such as throwing, dropping, bouncing, and rolling (**ACSSU076**)

Before the Show.



Performance Literacy

As students engage with and view live theatre, they develop a deeper understanding of the language of performance art. They develop literacies allowing them to 'read' the gestures and movements of a performer, and an understanding of the intention of the set, costume, lighting design and reflect on how they contribute to the narrative. Students consider the intended meaning of the playwrights, directors and/or artists' in choosing a setting, character, or artistic form as well as what they are looking to communicate through their work.

Attending live theatre and responding to performances, addresses the criteria for Literacy in line with the Australian Curriculum General Capabilities

... students become literate as they develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society. Literacy involves students listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing, and creating oral, print, visual and digital texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts.

Art is a means of expressing emotion, a way of transmitting feelings, culture, beliefs and values between the creators and performers of the work and the audience or viewers. Some art is created for the explicit purpose of eliciting a strong emotional response from the audience and there is a myriad of emotions that students will experience when they are viewing live performance from happiness to anger, surprise, annoyance, and confusion, just to name a few.

The **Before the Show** activities are designed to support students to develop these literacy skills, knowledge and understanding in relation to their Adelaide Festival experience.

The **After the Show** activities are designed to provide students with the opportunity to discuss, analyse and comprehend their responses to the show. Having a strong knowledge and understanding of theatre terminology will support students and extend their vocabulary as they describe their theatre experience with authentic language.

[Click here for an Example of Glossary of Dramatic Terms](#)



Before the Show.



Theatre Etiquette

The French word *etiquette*, meaning 'requirements for proper behaviour', was adopted by English speakers in the middle of the 18th century. This can sound a bit formal but understanding theatre etiquette helps an audience understand what to expect and how to get the most out of their theatre experience.

Depending on the age of an audience the expectations can vary. Theatre designed for very young audiences will have different expectations and will often invite and encourage participation. However, as the content becomes more complex and audiences mature, there is an expectation that students will have developed an understanding of the difference between enthusiastic participation and thoughtless disruption.

Group discussion: Why does it matter?

Students to talk about the theatre being a shared space and respecting other audience members attending the performance.

- Discuss the shared role of audience and performer, each is dependent on the other to ensure a great performance.
- Remind students that just as they can see the performers, the performers can see them!
- As a class exercise, compile a list of all the roles and tasks it takes to bring a live performance to the stage.
- **Extension activity:** In small groups, ask students to construct a book to tell a story about going to the theatre.

Theatre protocols to share with students

When in the foyer they should:

- Go to the toilet before going into the theatre.
- Follow the directions of the front of house staff.
- Turn off mobile phones.
- Wear a mask if required.

When the lights go down:

- This is a sign the performance is about to start. It is time to end chats and be quiet.
- Cover coughs and sneezes.
- No eating in the theatre. Only water bottles are allowed.

Photographing and filming is not permitted because:

- It can disturb the actors on the stage and break their concentration.
- Intellectual property is paramount. The production on stage is the intellectual property of the theatre company therefore no photographs or filming is allowed.
- You will be missing the detail you cannot see through the viewfinder.

Five broad groups of children whose responses as audience are characterised as:

- **Technicians** – children who are more interested in the technology than the performance, deconstructing the performance techniques employed in the show.
- **Narrators** – children who talk through the performance, asking questions, commenting on actions.
- **Dramatists** – children who immediately imitate what they see, participating through their own actions.
- **Mystics** – children who are completely engrossed in the sensory aspects of the experience.
- **Spectators** – children who hover around the edges, playing with whatever they can find, apparently not engaged, but often able afterwards to recall what they saw.

Ask your students which group they think they would be. Does their response match your observation?

Before the Show.

Suggested Activities



Dance

The following activities allow for students to experiment with moving material/objects through space. Students to select from a basket of large scarves/pieces of material.

TASK: Exploring with Fabric

Individually, students experiment (explore) with fabric: initially standing on the spot and then slowly move around the room in silence. This can be followed by selecting music that influences the pace of the movement. Suggest that they use the material as a dance partner, responding to the flow of the material, slowing creating a dance sequence.

TASK: Create Movement with Fabric

Students use fabric to create movement by shaking, swinging, flapping, and moving it over and around their body.

Drama

TASK: Emotional Reactions

Students to collect a variety of small objects from the room: anything boring, odd, tasty, smelly... Find objects that diversify emotional reactions.

1. Have one desk that is the 'hot seat' for the clown.
2. The student as clown sits down with their eyes closed.
3. Place one of the objects on a table in front of the student and the class to count to three. On three, the 'clown' opens their eyes and looks at the surprise object.
4. Immediately, the 'clown' does a 'take' to the audience, expressing how they feel: happy? disgusted? scared? mad? bored? The bolder and bigger the 'take', the funnier the response



Science

TASK: Paper Planes

Students to make paper planes.

www.abc.net.au/education/different-paper-plane-designs/13635692

As a group, students to discuss how the shapes and features of each paper plane influence the different ways they move through the air. Students to identify what shapes or features might be causing these differences.

After the Show.

Suggested Activities

TASK: Balloon Play

Students to play with different ways to move a balloon around – body parts, breath and/or fans.

In a group, students discuss what difference is observed when moving the balloon around with a variety of forms.

Repeat the exercise using light silk fabric and then a heavy fabric to compare and contrast the difference in weight of fabric.

The creators of Air Play spent eight weeks testing different objects. Some of the strangest objects tested to see how they would fly: lampshades, toilet paper, and a 20-foot custom-made inflatable plastic 'monster'. Not everything works!

TASK: This is not a ...

In a circle, pass around a paper plate/scarf/book. Ask students to think of what else the object might be and respond with: "this is not a paper plate, it is a ..." If you do not have an object, turn a chair upside down and place it in the middle of the circle. Students then respond with: "this is not a chair it is a ..."

TASK: Create a Story

Layout a collection of random objects (enough for your class to select three). Students in small groups select three objects and then work together to create a story line that includes each of the three objects.

TASK: How many flying props from *Air Play* can you remember?

1. Split the room into two big groups. Choose someone from each group to write down the list.
2. In one minute, how many flying objects from *Air Play* can they remember?
3. Compare the lists.

TASK: Guess that Scene

Devised shows often develop nicknames for big scenes that are never told to the public, over time becoming a hidden language that people outside of the project do not understand. 'Moby' is what the *Air Play* team calls the massive white fabric that hovers overhead: named, of course, after the giant white whale in Herman Melville's classic novel.

Ask the students to guess what scenes are *Butterflies*, *Jupiter*, and *Pas de Deux*?

Galileo Galilei's Idea

Aristotle, the Ancient Greek philosopher and scientist, believed that heavy objects fall faster than lighter ones. Galileo Galilei was amongst the first to challenge this theory and believed that objects of different weights but the same size would fall at the same speed.

In 1586, an experiment was conducted by two other scientists living in the Netherlands - Simon Stevin and Jan Cornets de Groot. They dropped two objects off a nearby tower, the Nieuwe Kerk. The objects were the same size, but one was ten times heavier than the other. They were dropped 30 feet and landed at the ground at the same time, indicating that objects of the same size fall at the same speed regardless of their weight. This proved that Aristotle was wrong.

Galileo Galilei also thought that two objects of different weights and different sizes would fall at the same speed within a vacuum. This theory was put to the test in 1971 when Apollo 15 landed on the moon. Commander David Scott conducted a 'drop test' using a feather and a hammer. They two objects did land at the same time. You can see a video of this experiment here:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYEgdZ3iEKA

TASK: Drop Test

1. Students to look around the classroom and guess what might fall slowly and softly.
2. Make a list of 10 objects and decide which they think will fall softly and which items will fall faster or harder.
3. Test these theories. Drop the objects and note whether they fall hard and fast or soft and slow. Note whether they fall in a straight line or not.
4. Using a hairdryer under supervision, students direct air underneath select objects and test the impact this has on them. Do the objects fall, fly away or hover? (A ping pong ball usually hovers.) Would it be different if the objects were bigger or smaller, lighter or heavier?

After the Show.

Suggested Activities (cont.)

Stories Without Words

Seth and Christina chose to make *Air Play* without words for many different reasons. They both had a lot of experience on stage without talking: Seth had been a juggler, and Christina used to be a ballet dancer. They have made six shows together, and none of their plays have ever had a written script.

One of the best advantages to a non-verbal show is that there is no language barrier. *Air Play* can perform anywhere in the world and the audience will understand the story. But there is another reason *Air Play* was made without words. They wanted to make a show that asked the audience to use their imagination to understand what was happening. In other words, *Air Play* was designed to be open-ended, so anyone could watch it and see their own story. A closed-ended question has limited answers. An open-ended question has a wide range of answers.

Seth and Christina have heard some amazing impressions of *Air Play*. Some people think it is about friendship, some think the characters are siblings who grow up and go to college, one woman remembered her brother who passed away, one boy thought it was about solving arguments, and someone else thought it was about refugees and immigration. All these answers are right. *Air Play* is a little bit like a mirror, what you see reflects some of you. Seth and Christina have performed together in more than 20 countries and on all six inhabited continents!

TASK: Emotions Game

This can be played in small groups or with the whole class. Each player makes a list of five emotions, keeping their chosen emotions to themselves. Set a timer for 20 seconds. One player 'performs' their emotions individually **without speaking** and the other students guess what emotions they are trying to portray.

TASK: Write a Review

Ask students to write a review of *Air Play*. (A4 template on the following page)



A review of *Air Play* by:

My star rating for *Air Play* is ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

The Performance

Describe an important scene or moment in *Air Play*:

.....
.....

Describe what you saw on the stage, costumes, lights:

.....
.....

Questions

What questions do you have for Seth Bloom and Christina Gelsone?

.....
.....

What do you think happened at the end? Who do you think the characters are? Would you give them names?

.....
.....

Describe *Air Play* to a friend. Imagine your friend is going to see the show, but they still want to be surprised, so make sure you describe it well without telling them everything about it.

.....
.....
.....

Your Opinion

What do you think the audience liked about *Air Play*?

.....
.....

Draw or write your favourite part of *Air Play*:

Meet the Company.



Acrobuffos

Seth Bloom and Christina Gelsone are the creators, writers, and performers of *Air Play*. Seth and Christina met at a circus in Afghanistan, became engaged while street performing in Scotland, married in China, and occasionally go home to New York City. Specialising in non-verbal physical theatre and comedy, Seth and Christina have created seven shows together, competed in international circus festivals, performed in over 28 countries, headlined at the Big Apple Circus, and were even featured on a postage stamp.

acrobuffos.com

Seth Bloom

Creator and Performer

Seth Bloom grew up in India, Kenya, and Sri Lanka. Seth spent many years touring the USA as a professional juggler and silent comedian and worked extensively in Afghanistan with the Mobile Mini Circus for Children. Seth studied circus clowning at Ringling Brothers Clown College, Lecoq theater at LISPA (MFA), and commedia at Dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre. A graduate of Wesleyan University, Seth has performed in 30 countries and 49 US States.

Christina Gelsone

Creator and Performer

Christina Gelsone grew up in Texas and has worked in 40 countries as a non-verbal clown, stilt walker, mask performer, juggler, puppeteer, and acrobat. Previously a ballet dancer, Christina majored in Shakespeare at Princeton University and studied corporeal mime at the Dell'Arte School of Physical Theatre. For years, Christina worked in multiple post-war zones with New York City-based Bond Street Theatre. Other professional adventures include starting a social circus program in Egypt and teaching at universities.

Daniel Wurtzel

Air Sculptor

Daniel Wurtzel is a New York artist best known for his kinetic sculptures using air and lightweight materials that fly. Daniel's sculptures have been featured on Broadway, Cirque du Soleil, the Olympics, and with theatre directors such as Julie Taymor, Diane Paulus, Robert Lepage, and Zhang Yimou. Museums around the world that display Daniel's work include the Musee Rodin, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, and the Museu do Amanha in Rio de Janeiro.

danielwurtzel.com

Additional Resources.

www.acrobuffos.com/video

Reviews

"Something wonderful is in the air."
– *The New York Times* (2022)

"making magic out of thin air."
– *The New York Times* (2018)

"...hardly your average clowns"
– *The New York Times* (2009)

★★★★

"'Fun for all ages' is a common puff in the arts, but with *Air Play* it is strictly true. A joy from start to finish, *Air Play* will entrance children, and will act as a great reset button for stressed adults."
– *Sydney Morning Herald*

"*Air Play* holds the whole audience in the palm of its outstretched hand. A winning combination of visually stunning sculptures and cheeky but heartfelt storytelling that keeps both adults and children enthralled." – *British Theatre Guide*

"You feel you're witnessing divine natural occurrences rather than carefully devised circus stunts."
– *Hartford Courant*

"The curtains open and we see a man holding on to a huge piece of light fabric, dancing in the air, moved by a circle of fans. The wonder begins and I suddenly feel like a child again, receptive to every single magical moment in *Air Play*." – *A Younger Theatre*

"ONE OF THE TOP ACTS 2010. The act requires enthusiastic audience participation as two people from the crowd don bin bags and spiky helmets to have a water- bomb fight set to opera music. Warm-hearted, wordless, and lovely." – *The Press, NEW ZEALAND*

"...they are the new stars of the circus's 35th season." – *New York Daily News*

"Their humour totally revolutionizes your thinking of clowning." – *White Tops (circus fan magazine)*

"The clowns were a big hit with the audience." – *DC Metro Theater Arts*

"They come out in great costumes and wonderful masks and do a very funny act. The Acrobuffos are one hilarious couple to experience." – *Amsterdam News*

