

# BOXTALES Theatre Company

IRON JOHN (Eiserne Hans) by the Brothers Grimm

Teacher Guide K-6

## About the Artists

Boxtales is a storytelling theatre company which uses masks, movement, storytelling and live music to present myths and folklore from around the world. Performers Matt Tavianini, Jeff Mills and Michael Andrews combine their diverse talents to create a professional, high energy, highly interactive theatrical experience for young audiences.

## About the Program

This production, built by Michael Andrews and Matt Tavianini, explores the folk tale of a prince who must leave his kingdom and journey into the wilderness, into poverty, and into danger, before reuniting with his family and winning his bride, and freeing an enchanted King. Boxtales' *Iron John* draws on a vast range of theatrical and performance traditions, including storytelling, live music, Commedia dell'Arte, clowning, acrobatics, yoga, stage combat, and dramatic acting to bring this ancient tale to life.

## Program Goals

The overall goal of this program is to give students a chance to really explore and experience the folk tale tradition. We want them to see how these timeless stories contain images and events that relate directly to the experience of being alive and journeying to adulthood. Specifically, our goals with this program are:

- To introduce students to one of the classic stories of the Brothers Grimm.
- To introduce students to the concept of folk tales as metaphors for life journeys.
- To help the students to tell the story of *Iron John* from memory.
- To encourage students to seek out and read other stories in an active way.
- To help develop students' creative imaginations.
- To introduce the importance of oral tradition as an educational tool.
- To create an appreciation and affection for live stage performance.
- To present stories that will help raise self-esteem and teach important lessons.
- To inspire students to attend other performing arts events.

## Preparation for the Program:

The Brothers Grimm is the name by which we talk of two German brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, who were born about a year apart, in 1785 and 1786 respectively. Their father died when they were 11 and 12, and their family was very poor for a time, but the brothers worked hard and soon were recognized as superior scholars. They went to school together and spent their entire lives with each other, and are buried side by side. They were fascinated by the German language and by German stories. They wrote books on sagas, poetry and folk tales, and worked intensively on the first modern German dictionary. The publication of their works led to a great blossoming of pride in German literature and culture. Scholars in other countries followed the Grimm Brothers' lead, collecting stories from their own cultures which would otherwise have been lost.

The first edition of the Grimm Brothers' *Children's and Household Tales* was published in 1815, with eighty-seven stories collected from over forty storytellers. It was immensely popular, and the brothers produced many subsequent editions. In 1843, the Grimms replaced a story called *The Wild Man* with *Iron Hans*, or *Iron John* as the English translator titled the story. Wilhelm Grimm wrote this story himself, using *The Wild Man*, an oral story they had collected, and a story from another book. According to Jack Zipes, a fairy tale scholar, Wilhelm made his Wild Man less demonic than the original, more of a mentor to the prince. He smoothed out the action of the tale, and inserted a moral lesson, praising loyalty and hard work. He also made the story more sentimental than the earlier versions.

Folk tales are based on oral storytelling. People all over the world have told stories to demonstrate human hopes, fears, weaknesses, strengths, evils and virtues, and to make sense of our existence in the world. The stories are ancient and timeless. According to Carl Jung, the great psychoanalyst, folk tales contain cultural symbols that express eternal truths. They are powerful because they are fundamental. And they are constantly changing as the world changes and different people tell them. There are at least forty versions of Snow White in English, in addition to the one made popular by Walt Disney. From folk tales, children and adults learn that aggression, cruelty, selfishness, anger, fear, all are human, and all must be understood and controlled, as they lead to danger. Folk tales tell us that evil is powerful, death is present, danger lurks, but also that help can arrive from strange places – animals, wild beings, magic – and that even the smallest, youngest child can overpower the strong through cleverness and kindness. Folk tales have been called compacted wisdom literature, giving us insights into our world and our experience and helping us move courageously through the world.

## **PRE-PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES**

Read *Iron John* aloud to your class.

Review *Iron John* by asking these questions:

1. What happened to the huntsman's dog at the beginning of the story?/He was pulled into a pool in the dark forest by a naked arm.

2. How did the huntsman find the Wild Man?/He and other men emptied the pool with buckets.
3. What did the King do with the Wild Man?/ Put him in an iron cage and gave the key to the Queen.
4. What did the Wild Man ask the boy to do in exchange for his golden ball?/Get the key from under the Queen's pillow.
5. How many times did the boy fail Iron John's test? What made him fail each time?/Three times. Pain, pain, then vanity or whatever you come up with as a class.
6. Why did the boy give the princess wildflowers instead of garden flowers?/ He said they smelled sweeter and would please her more.
7. What did the boy ask Iron John to give him? What did he receive?/A horse. A horse, and a huge army.
8. In the contest of the golden ball, how many times did the boy get the ball, and what color horses was he riding?/Three times. Red, white, black.
9. What did the boy ask for from the King in return for saving the kingdom?/The princess.
10. Who were the prince's three guests at his wedding? The King and Queen, his parents, and a King who had been enchanted and turned into Iron John.

### **Discussion Questions:**

- What do you think are the basic elements of a folk tale?
- Do you have a favorite folk tale? Can you tell it? What makes it your favorite story?
- Is there a folk tale that scares you? What is it? What scares you about it?
- What do you think are the most important moments in *Iron John*?
- Be ready to think about what happens when you see the story in performance – What clear structural changes were made by the actors in their version? Were the images different than what you had imagined when reading it? How? Were different themes stressed in the production than in the original story? Which ones? How was this done?

### **Follow-up Ideas and Activities**

These topics can be discussed as a class or used as essay topics:

- *Iron John* tells about a boy's journey through the world to adulthood. How would the story change if the story were about a girl?
- Does *Iron John* have a moral? If so, what is the moral for you?
- *Iron John* starts with a boy and a Wild Man and ends with a young man and a King. What has happened to both in the course of the story?
- Read *Cinderella*, *Bearskin*, and/or *East of the Sun, West of the Moon*. What are the similarities and differences between these stories and *Iron John*? What do they show about life?
- Why do you think the boy has to steal the key from his mother?

- Why does the boy have to “experience poverty” as Iron John says? What does he learn?
- What role does the wilderness play in this story? Where is it, what does it do?

Write a review of Boxtales’ *Iron John*. This should include a discussion of the Grimm story, and the choices made to turn the tale into a performance. What was lost and gained in the movement from spoken text to drama? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the production? What would you have changed? What did you think worked best?

Write your own folk tale that has someone like you as the central character. Who would you be? Who would help you? What problem would you encounter? What magical aid would you receive? How would you solve the problem?

You could also group students together for:

## **A Storytelling Festival**

This activity encourages students to explore folk tales and aspects of oral storytelling, and to share their knowledge with others.

### **WHAT YOU NEED**

Examples of legends or folktales from any culture. Children can choose stories from the culture their family feels most strongly linked to - such as Mexico, Spain, Africa, Ireland, North America, France, Japan, the Philippines - and put together stories with similar themes.

### **WHAT TO DO**

1. Introduce students to legends and folk tales by reading a variety to the class (or referring to the BOXTALES performance.) If possible, choose a story that explains some aspect of the culture from which it comes, such as the origin of a custom or of an element in the natural world.
2. Explain that many of these stories were invented by rural storytellers, who passed them on to others orally, not in writing. Only later were they written down. Tell students that they are going to become oral storytellers themselves. They will choose a story to learn and then present the story as part of a storytelling festival. (Note: 398 and 398.2 section of the library is mythology and folktales from all over the world.)
3. Divide students into storytelling teams. Give students time to do research and to choose a story. Tell students that their story should say something important about the culture from which it comes. Remind students that their stories will be performed and that they might want to choose a story that lends itself to a dramatic reading or presentation. (Note: You might want to review the groups' choices. Look for simple forms with good morals, dynamic characters, good action, etc.)

4. The group should study the story and make a plan for how they would like to perform it. For example, students may want to assign different parts of the story to each group member or have one group member act out a part or play an instrument, etc. Encourage students to be creative about their presentations. Some students may want to add music and props, some may be able to incorporate costumes or rhythmic movements.
5. Allow enough rehearsal time for each group. Hold the first performances in the classroom. Then discuss with students how to share the story with other classes, or with family and community members. (Note: You may find that the quality is so high you want to charge a cover and fund your next production with the proceeds!)

## **Bibliography and Further Reading**

*Iron John* by the Brothers Grimm

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment*.

O'Neill, Thomas. *Guardians of the Fairy Tale: The Brothers Grimm*.

Zipes, Jack. *The Brothers Grimm: From Enchanted Forest to the Modern World*.  
Palgrave MacMillan, 2002.

There is an interesting folklore and myth course online at:

<http://www.mythfolklore.net/3043mythfolklore/courseinfo/index.htm>

Sites with information about the Grimm brothers and online versions of the stories:

[http://www.mahalo.com/The\\_Brothers\\_Grimm](http://www.mahalo.com/The_Brothers_Grimm)

<http://www.surlalunefairytales.com>

<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/2591>

<http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/grimmtales.html>