

JANEFranklinDANCE

Mouse in House, adapted from the book, The Mouse of Amherst, by Elizabeth Spires

Integrating Movement with Poetry, Language Arts, Media and Social Studies

1. Program description

The Mouse of Amherst adapted from the book by Baltimore author Elizabeth Spires is a performance for children. Emmaline, a mouse who has taken up residence behind the wall in Emily Dickinson's room is intrigued by Dickinson's labors at her desk. Emmaline finally discovers the poet's talents when a sheet of paper falls to the floor. The inspired mouse responds with her own poetry, and a friendship is struck. Gradually the mouse learns everyone has feelings and that even a mouse can write poetry. The locations in the story are made significant through video projections. Imagination is led from inside Emily's bedroom, to a slumbering world of words, to a garden, kitchen, and out into the landscapes of the wide world. The four dancers fully develop the characters of Emily, her sister Lavinia, the mouse Emmaline, and the little sister mouse Emma through movement, dialogue and with poems by Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Spires.

2. Program goals and objectives:

The purpose of *The Mouse of Amherst, adapted from the book by Elizabeth Spires* is to inspire students to explore poetry, language arts, and to nurture self-expression through movement and the literary arts. An objective is appreciation for Emily Dickinson's poems. In *Booklist*, for instance, Susan Dove Lempke wrote: "The simple story gives young readers a first taste of Dickinson's poetry as well as an idea of the relationship formed between a poet and a reader." Children learn historical information about Emily Dickinson, a poet who contributed greatly to American literature, yet experienced rejection and self-doubt. The goal is to inspire students to read, write, and to appreciate the different gifts and talents waiting to be explored in everyone.

Program outline:

Below is an outline of the performance which highlights some of the poems.

Video excerpt can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b02XHRp3mX4>

Introduction

Two sister mice, Emmaline and Emma, find a home at the Dickinson's.

From a hiding place, they observe Emily and watch the paper fly. On one scrap of paper they find a poem:

Day by day and year by year,
You soon will find by living here
That words you thought you knew so well
Big ones, small ones, short ones, tall ones
Words in every shape and size
Hold many meanings, more surprise
Than you would give them credit for

They also meet Emily's sister Lavinia, who regards Emily's writing as nothing more than scribbling.

I. Discovery

White curtains are rising and falling in the gentle breeze.

An unexpected gust of wind blows half-sheets everywhere and Emmaline realizes she is holding a poem that Emily has written:

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If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain.

Emmaline knows those are her feelings exactly. She had always been too embarrassed to say them...but maybe she could write.

II. Dreaming of Words

A deepening friendship between Emily and Emmaline grows as poems are exchanged between the two writers. One night, Emmaline becomes so absorbed in her work that she falls asleep. During her restless sleep, she dreams of jumbled nursery rhymes as words float in her brain. In the morning she finds that Emily has written back.

I'm a Nobody! Who are you?
Are you --Nobody--too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't Tell! they'd banish us - you know!

III. Under the Dining Room Table and the Household Cat

Emmaline and Emma have lost all track of time and realize they have missed breakfast. They smell the delicious aroma of bacon as they make their way to the kitchen

Crumbs fell off the table,
Came crashing to the floor--
And I--a church mouse to the last--
came scurrying for more.

Under the dining-room table
I hid my small self fast--
While shadows lunched in leisure--
Enjoying a fine repast.

A mountain of sugar glistened
In a snow-white sugar bowl---
A silver urn poured coffee--
And cream was a waterfall.

Voices spoke politely--
"Please pass me more of that"
My heart stopped for a moment
When I thought I heard the Cat.

IV. Decision

Emmaline must get away from that cat! She has to decide whether to leave the Dickinsons' because

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she knows Emily never will. She has the choice to take her chances and venture into the wide world. Or to stay and spend years deepening friendship while tiptoeing around the cat.

On this wondrous sea
Sailing silently,
Ho! Pilot, ho!
Knowest thou the shore
Where no breakers roar--
Where the storm is o'er?

In the peaceful west
Many the sail at rest--
The anchors fast--
Thither I pilot thee--
Land Ho! Eternity!
Ashore at last!

V. Belief

Emmaline is so happy to have Emily for a friend; but here in this house she fear for own safety, and wonders what lies out there for her; beyond this world inside.

Who was I!
Why I was here?
Where I was going?

I sailed on a Leaf
By the name of Belief
Over the wide, wide Sea--

The Moon on my left
The stars on my right
Were there to guide only me.

Alone and Free
It felt good to be Me
On the Ship of my Life --Belief!

Emmaline decides to leave her own little poem as a parting gift for Emily:

I began as a Nobody and I shall most likely end as a Nobody. But along the way I have come to discover the mystery and joy of words.

3. Relationship to core curriculum:

Examples for how this material may be used for Language Arts/English related goals and Standards of Learning in K-5:

- K.1 The student will demonstrate growth in the use of oral language.
- Listen to a variety of literary forms, including stories and poems.
 - Participate in choral speaking and recite short poems, rhymes, songs, and stories with repeated patterns.
 - Participate in creative dramatics.

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- e) Recognize rhyming words.
- f) Generate rhyming words in a rhyming pattern.

- 1.1, 2.7 The student will continue to demonstrate growth in the use of oral language.
- c) Participate in a variety of oral language activities, including choral speaking and reciting short poems, rhymes, songs, and stories with repeated patterns.
 - d) Express ideas orally in complete sentences.
- 4.7 The student will write effective narratives, poems, and explanations.
- e) Utilize elements of style, including word choice and sentence variation.
 - f) Write rhymed, unrhymed, and patterned poetry.

PRE AND POST PERFORMANCE ACTIVITY

1. Introduce Emily Dickinson through her biography.

"Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (December 10, 1830 – May 15, 1886) was an American poet. Born in Amherst, Massachusetts, to a successful family with strong community ties, she lived a mostly introverted and reclusive life. Although Dickinson was a prolific private poet, fewer than a dozen of her nearly eighteen hundred poems were published during her lifetime. The work that was published during her lifetime was usually altered significantly by the publishers to fit the conventional poetic rules of the time. Dickinson's poems are unique for the era in which she wrote; they contain short lines, typically lack titles, and often use slant rhyme as well as unconventional capitalization and punctuation. Many of her poems deal with themes of death and immortality, two recurring topics in letters to her friends." http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emily_Dickinson

There are many books, biographies, anthologies of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Her material is widely available online, in libraries and bookstores.
<http://www.online-literature.com/dickinson/>

2. When, Where and How Writing Exercise Explore the places that Emily Dickinson chose to write. How does location and time of day influence thoughts, ideas and writing? Write 'aloud' and consider that process. http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/poet_at_work

3. Interactive Explorations Find historical information and explore Dickinson's compositional process. <http://www.emilydickinson.org/safe/exercises/>

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

[The Mouse of Amherst](#) by Elizabeth Spires
[Creative Dance For All Ages](#) by Anne Green Gilbert
[Teaching the Three R's](#) by Ann Green Gilbert

Artists whose work appears in the show:

Mark Sylvester, composer: <http://www.marksylvester.net/>
Steven Rogers, composer: http://www.stevenrogers.us/Steven_Rogers/home.html
Bryan Leister, media: <http://www.bryanleister.com/>
Paul Musso, composer: <http://carbon.ucdenver.edu/~pmusso/>
Elizabeth Spires, writer and poet: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/elizabeth-spires>