sugar skull! a día de muertos musical adventure
Twelve-year-old Vita Flores thinks her family has gone loco planning a celebration for deceased loved ones. Why throw a party for the dead? But when a spirited candy skeleton suddenly springs to life, Vita finds herself on a magical, musical journey to unravel the true meaning of Día de Muertos. Meet Sugar Skull, a charismatic skeleton with a secret or two. With her skeletal new friend, Vita dances with ancient ancestors, sings with a sorrowful sorceress, escapes the trickster Chaneques and even meets the famous Catrina Calavera. But can this clever youth gather the missing pieces needed for her family’s ofrenda before it’s too late? Sugar Skull! is a joyous, heartfelt adventure that delves into the rich, tuneful traditions of Día de Muertos, an annual celebration in Mexican and Latin American culture.

Mexico Beyond Mariachi is a multicultural ensemble of professional musicians, actors, dancers and teaching artists whose love of Mexican traditions and culture shine bright in every performance. Founded in New York City in 2005, the company was quickly heralded as one of the leading providers of Mexican performance and education programs for young people and families in the New York tri-state area. Their philosophy is rooted in the belief that arts and culture are an integral part of developing every individual’s outlook on life. Personal engagement, community experiences and the celebration of commonality are themes Mexico Beyond Mariachi brings to their shows.

How did you come up with the title of the performance? The name of the show, Sugar Skull! A Día de Muertos Musical Adventure came about because we wanted to center the show on a character and narrative, distinguishing it from just a general music/dance celebration of the holiday.

Why is it important to center a production like this on Día de Muertos? Legends, myths, history and a little bit of magic are an important part of Día de Muertos. This production delves deeper into the meaning and importance of the traditions and how they shape Mexican and Mexican-Americans’ lives. It is also important to show to U.S. audience that the holiday is something sacred and deeply valued. It is also important for audiences to understand that Día de Muertos is also not a Mexican version of Halloween.

Aside from this production, what other films or books would you suggest to people who want to learn more about Día de Muertos? There are so many books out there about Día de Muertos, especially for children. A few that stand out are:
- Gift For Abuelita by Nancy Luenn
- Catrina's Day of the Dead by Adriana Moroles Marin
- Calavera Abecedario by Jeanette Winter

These movies by Mexican directors are wonderful:
- The Book of Life
- Hasta Los Huesos
- La Leyenda de la Nahuala

What was the hardest part about putting this musical together? It was making sure that we stayed true to the traditional music, dance and spirit of the holiday. Weaving a narrative that covers a lot of ground while having it all make sense to the audience was a particular challenge.

How important was it to include a predominantly Mexican cast? Very important – the cast brings with them their own traditions and idiomatic expressions that give an authenticity to the action that only enhances the script. They also come from different parts of Mexico, so there may be a song that’s played one way in a certain part of Mexico and quite differently in another. This diversity only adds to the richness of the production.

Why is the holiday celebrated over two days? Traditionally, November 1st honors deceased children and November 2nd honors deceased adults. However, preparations for the two days of celebration can take a weeks or months in advance of the actual holiday.

What is the main message you want people to take away from Sugar Skull? We all yearn for a sense of belonging and understanding of our identity. Sometimes those answers aren’t as clear as we’d like. But if we look to our past there are clues there that can give us comfort and help guide us.
## Inspired Ideas in the Classroom

**Prep for the Performance**

*What is Dia de Muertos?*
*For the introduction to this program, play your favorite scene from the film “Coco” (2017).*

- **If you have…**
  - 5 minutes (and all below): Talk to students about audience behavior/expectations (audience etiquette).
  - 15 minutes: Play only the National Geographic film.
  - 45 minutes: Do all of the above in addition to playing the video (SCHOOL FRIENDLY) What is El Dia De Las Muertoss? by Eddie GI

Use the guiding questions in the Student Activity section for expanding frames of thinking and discussion.

**Experience the Performance**

*Before the performance, review the questions and conversation starters in the Student Activity section to promote active listening and observational skills.*

- **Encourage students to pay attention to the different ways of storytelling used in this performance (i.e., acting, singing, movement/dance, and sound). Take note of the performance aspects students enjoy and have questions about.*

- **Have the student leader report out as an exit ticket.**

- **As students rehearse their performances in their small areas, emphasize the importance of creating original performance art pieces where the visual and theatrical aspects matter.**

- **Have students break into their groups. Walk around and observe students as they plan and rehearse their scenes.**

**Reflect, respond and read**

*Reflect: Ask students to share their favorite moments from the performance.*

*Respond: Offer the students a chance to answer the questions on the “Talk Back” (p. 11) section of the study guide.*

*Read: Rosita y Conchita (and for all below):*

**Focus**

*What is an ofrenda? Show students images of ofrendas and make observations.*

**Originate**

*Break the class into groups. Have each group select a location for a small performance.*

*Ask students to consider how Sugar Skull combined acting and storytelling.*

*Ask students to create a performance art piece that uses original art and storytelling techniques:*

- **Draw or sculpt one memorable object for a group ofrenda.**
- **Rehearse your scene by going over your lines and have questions about.**

**Rehearse**

*Allow students to break into their groups. Walk around and observe students as they plan and rehearse their scenes.*

*Give the groups equal time to spend on their ofrenda object and the musical movement aspect.*

*Assign a leader for each group to keep track of the time and keep peers on task.*

*Have the student leader report out as an exit ticket.*

*As students rehearse their performances in their small areas, emphasize the importance of creating original performance art pieces where the visual and theatrical aspects matter.*

*Ask students what they hope to feel as a result of their offering to a loved one (personal or famous).*

**Make magic**

*Before each performance, allow prep time for group. Remind students of appropriate audience etiquette, and to be active listeners.*

*Invite neighboring classes and/or supportive staff/administration to see the class performances. Students will provide constructive feedback after each group’s performance, focusing on how the group combined visual art and performance.*

### Teacher Focus

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<td>What is the celebration of Day of the Dead?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rehearse</td>
<td>What family, cultural, religious or community traditions connect you to others?</td>
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<td>Make magic</td>
<td>What do you feel after learning more about Day of the Dead from the National Geographic film? (Dia de Muertos is a holiday that is serious to those who celebrate, but also has elements of fun too)</td>
<td>English Language Arts NJSLS.A.SL1</td>
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### Standards

- **Standards:**
  - **English Language Arts:** NJSLS.A.SL1, NJSLS.A.SL2
  - **Social Studies:** 6.1B U.S. History: America in the World
  - **Visual & Performing Arts:** 1.2 History of Arts & Culture, 1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique
  - **World Languages:** 7.1NL.8PBT.5L
FIND THE STANDARDS
For more detailed information on the standards, visit these websites:
NATIONAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS
corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy
NATIONAL SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS
socialstudies.org/standards
NATIONAL CORE ARTS ANCHOR STANDARDS
nationalartsstandards.org

common core state standards

English Language Arts
NJSLA.5.L.1 Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
NJSLA.5.L.2 Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Social Studies
6.1.B U.S. History: America in the World - Critical & analytical thinking about how past and present interactions of people, cultures, and the environment shape the American heritage. Such knowledge and skills enable students to make informed decisions that reflect democratic rights and core democratic values as productive citizens in local, national, and global communities.

Visual & Performing Arts
1.2 History of Arts & Culture - Develop understanding of the role, development, and influence of the arts throughout history and across cultures.
1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique - Demonstrate and apply an understanding of arts philosophies, judgment, and analysis to works of art in dance, music, theatre, and visual art.

World Languages
7.1.LNL.PRET.2 Learning a language involves interpreting meaning from listening, viewing, and reading culturally authentic materials in the target language. Respond with physical actions and/or gestures to simple oral directions, commands, and requests.

Educational standards

National Core Arts Anchor Standards
1: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.
2: Refine and complete artistic work.
3: Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.
4: Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.
5: Perceive and analyze artistic work.
6: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
7: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

 Dia de Muertos, or Day of the Dead in English, is one of Mexico’s oldest holidays. This tradition was practiced by indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America for over six centuries, such as the Aztecs and the Toltecs. Dia de Muertos allows the community to honor loved ones who have passed on. One of the beliefs surrounding this holiday, originating from the Nahua people of central Mexico, was that the deceased traveled on a year-long journey to Chicunamictlán, or the Land of the Dead. The living would provide supplies such as water to help them on their trek, in addition to leaving offerings at the gravesites of loved ones. While the American holiday Halloween shares similar customs to Dia de Muertos, like wearing costumes, receiving and eating candy and community gatherings, the two holidays are not related.

In Aztec culture, death isn’t considered the end of one’s existence, but simply the beginning of a new chapter in life. Rather than grieve those who died, ancient Mexicans celebrated the lives of the deceased and honored their memories. During Dia de Muertos, observed November 1st and 2nd, it is believed the dead have a brief window to leave the spirit realm and visit their loved ones in the mortal world.

As part of the traditions, the Aztecs would place skulls, or calaveras, at temples to honor those who have passed on. In modern celebrations of Día de Muertos, ofrendas or offerings for the departed loved ones are placed on an altar at home. The altars are decorated with cempasuchil, or marigold flowers; photos and favorite foods of those being honored. These offerings are believed to encourage visits from the Land of the Dead as the departed souls hear prayers, smell their favorite foods and join in on the celebrations. There is also special bread called pan de muerto that is made only for Día de Muertos. Favorite letters and poems are often read aloud by family members in honor of their loved ones. Aside from offerings, each of the four elements is represented on the altar: a candle for fire, papel picado, a colorful tissue paper folk art for wind; food for Earth and water is represented by itself.

Skulls are also a symbol of this holiday celebration. Sugar skulls made of clay are decorated and painted. In addition, those celebrating the holiday wear skull costumes or paint their face as a skull. La Calavera Catrina, or “Elegant Skull” is the decorative face painting commonly attributed to Día de Muertos, and dates back to a 1910 zinc etching featuring a female skeleton. José Guadalupe Posada, originator of La Calavera Catrina, was a printmaker and lithographer who started putting images of skulls and skeletal figures in his art during the early 20th century. Posada used these images to revolutionize the way viewers thought about politics, religion and death. In 1920, he produced La Calavera Catrina, a portrait of an indigenous woman in a hat, a French dress and lots of makeup, making her skin look whiter. The popularity of that lithograph led to the rise in painted faces to mimic the beauty and sorrow Catrina embodied.
Vocabulary

Cempasúchil
Or flor de muerto in Spanish, is the name for marigold flowers that are used in Day of the Dead celebrations.

Chaneques
Small, sprite-like creatures from Mexican folklore that are guardians of nature and the elemental forces.

Character Traits
Words that describe a character’s personality or qualities that make them who they are.

Conflict
A serious disagreement or argument with something or someone.

Dialogue
A conversation between characters.

Genre
A style of art, music or literature that involves a particular set of characteristics.

Gesture
A movement of the body or limbs.

Objective
A character’s goals, needs and wants that drive their actions in a scene or play.

Ofrenda
Translated from Spanish, meaning “offerings.” The ofrenda is an altar created in the home of a family to commemorate the soul and memory of a deceased loved one.

Pan de Muerto
A special type of bread made for Día de Muertos.

Papel Picado
A traditional Mexican craft that features colorful paper sheets with intricate cut-out details. It is made by stacking many sheets of paper and using chisels to cut the designs.

Plot
The main events of a play, novel, movie or similar work, presented by the writer as a sequence. A plot has the elements of exposition, inciting incident, conflict, rising action, climax and resolution or falling action.

Script
A piece of writing for the theater that includes a description of the setting, a list of the characters, the dialogue and the action of the characters.

Staging
Patterns of movement in a scene or play.

Story Elements
Five components that keep the story running smoothly, including the characters, setting, plot, conflict and resolution.

Theme
The subject of a talk, a piece of writing, a person’s thoughts or a particular topic.

resources

Websites
Mexico Beyond Mariachi
mexicobeyondmariachi.com

Day of the Dead holiday
dayofthedead.holiday

Day of the Dead: How Ancient Traditions Grew Into a Global Holiday
history.com/news/day-of-the-dead-dia-de-los-muertos-origins

Beyond Sugar Skulls: The History and Culture of Día de los Muertos
pbs.org/education/blog/beyond-sugar-skulls-the-history-and-culture-of-dia-de-los-muertos

National Geographic Kids: Day of the Dead
kids.nationalgeographic.com/explore/celebrations/day-of-the-dead

Smithsonian: Five facts about Día de los Muertos (The Day of the Dead)
insider.com/sa/5-facts-dia-de-los-muertos-day-dead

Video from National Geographic Kids: What is Day of the Dead?
youtube.com/watch?v=3uckNp0hBlc

Smithsonian Magazine: Festivals of the Dead Around the World
smithsonianmag.com/travel/festivals-dead-around-world-180953160/?pagess

Guide for Additional Resources and Crafts:
Museum of Latin American Art
static1.squarespace.com/static/59b9c2b7d2b8570174037c16/t/5baee13553450afc1658e89d/1538187579945/2018+MOLAA+Dia+de+los+Muertos+Packet.pdf

Anatomy of a Day of the Dead altar
the arts in your school

In-School Residencies: NJPAC teaching artists come right to your school — online — to teach the performing arts to your students. Our super-flexible virtual residencies are designed to meet your needs, and you'll have a dedicated program manager to help you every step of the way. It's the perfect program to keep your students creating, connecting and expressing themselves through the magic of the arts.

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study the arts at njpac

Saturday Programs: NJPAC's Saturday programs are geared towards students at every level — from those who dream of starring on Broadway to those who are still learning their scales. Students work with professional artists to build technique and develop their own creative style in hip hop, jazz, devised theater and symphonic band.

Summer Programs: Want to begin to explore the arts? Or immerse yourself in the study of one genre? Then join us at NJPAC next summer in one of seven programs that spark the creativity in every child through the study of music, dance and theater.

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