

teacher resource guide

**schooltime
performance
series**



**sugar skull!
a día de muertos
musical adventure**

**arts
education
njpac**
discover. create. grow.



in the spotlight Interview with Leah Keith and Peter Bogdanos

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 Morales 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.



about the performance

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.

about mexico beyond mariachi

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.

inspired ideas in the classroom

Teacher Focus

Student Activity

NJ Student Learning Standards

P

Prepare for the performance

What is Día de Muertos?
For the introduction to this program, play your favorite scene from the film **"Coco" (2017)**.
To introduce Día de Muertos, play the National Geographic video **"What is Day of the Dead?"**
If you have...
5 minutes (and for all below): Talk to students about audience behavior/expectations (audience etiquette).
15 minutes: Play only the National Geographic film
25 minutes: Play the National Geographic video and one minute of Day of the Dead live footage in Mexico
Día de Muertos en Arocutin - Lago de Pátzcuaro Michoacán 2 de noviembre 2017
45 minutes: Do all of the above in addition to playing the video **(SCHOOL FRIENDLY) What is El Día De Los Muertos? by Eddie G!**
Use the guiding questions in the Student Activity section for expanding frames of thinking and discussion.

1. How is watching a movie or TV show different from watching a live theater performance?
2. Why is the audience supposed to act a certain way when watching a live performance versus watching a movie or TV show at home? (i.e., being in-person instead of at home, being respectful to the artists and actors on stage, enjoying the performance in the present moment)
3. What emotions do you feel when watching the scene from Coco? (i.e., even though the story is about the dead, it is still a happy, fun and hopeful movie)
4. What do you feel after learning more about Day of the Dead from the National Geographic film? (Día de Muertos is a holiday that is serious to those who celebrate, but also has elements of fun too)

English Language Arts
NJLSA.SL1
NJLSA.SL2
NJ Social Studies
6.1.8 U.S. History: America in the World
Visual & Performing Arts
1.2 History of Arts & Culture
1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique
World Languages
7.1.NL.IPRET.2

E

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.

- Look at and listen to the performance.
What do you see and hear that helps you understand the story, characters or setting better?
While watching *Sugar Skull!* consider the following themes:
1. What is the celebration of Day of the Dead?
 2. How is Día de Muertos similar and different to Halloween?
 3. What traditions do you have to connect to loved ones who have passed?
 4. What family, cultural, religious or community traditions connect you to others?

Visual & Performing Arts
1.1 The Creative Process
1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique

R

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* together for the first few minutes. Ask students to listen closely and choose a favorite Spanish word.

- Reflect:** What was the most memorable part of the musical for you? Why?
Respond: Discuss the questions your teacher asked before the performance. How do your answers compare to those of other students?
Read: Share their favorite Spanish words and discuss mnemonic ways to remember new words.

English Language Arts
NJLSA.SL1
NJLSA.SL2
NJLSA.R1

F

Focus

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

- Look carefully at the photos of the *ofrenda* and respond to the following questions:**
1. What do you see? Knowing that *ofrendas* are made to honor lost loved ones, what might some of the items you see represent?
 2. Can you think of someone in your life who you would like to make an *ofrenda* for? If not, think of someone famous who you admire (i.e., Barack Obama, Frida Kahlo, Mahatma Ghandi, Nina Simone, etc.)

English Language Arts
NJLSA.SL2
Social Studies
6.1.8 U.S. History: America in the World
Visual & Performing Arts
1.1 The Creative Process

O

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:

1. Draw or sculpt one memorable object for a group *ofrenda* for the individuals students chose during the "Focus" section.
2. Come up with a unique movement and sound for you to perform while you place your part of the *ofrenda* on the altar.

In groups, decide on the location for your performance. Consider how *Sugar Skull!* used music and acting to tell a story. Plan your group's performance around the *ofrenda* and add some compelling background music.

Visual & Performing Arts
1.1 The Creative Process

R

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).

Discuss how to combine visual art with performance art for your group *ofrenda*. Rehearse your scene by going over your lines (if you have any), practicing your movement and ensuring background music is set. Make sure one group member is the leader of time, one is the leader of background music and all group members have a chance to participate.

English Language Arts
NJLSA.SL1
Visual & Performing Arts
1.1 The Creative Process
1.3 Performance

M

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.

- Offer helpful feedback after each group's performance, focusing on the following questions:
What did this group do that was different from your group?
What was your favorite part of their performance?
What might have made their performance even better?
When you perform, perform your scene to the best of your ability. Have fun and be supportive of each other's performances!

Visual & Performing Arts
1.3 Performance
1.4 Aesthetic Response & Critique

curriculum standards

National Core Arts Anchor Standards

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

common core state standards

English Language Arts

NJSLSA.SL1

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.

NJSLSA.SL2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Social Studies

6.1.8

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 fundamental rights and core democratic values as productive citizens in local, national, and global communities.

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

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.NL.IPRET.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

cultural connections

About Día de Muertos

Día 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. Día de Muertos allows the community to honor loved ones who have passed on. One of the beliefs surrounding this holiday, originating from the Nahuatl 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 like food and water to aid them on the trek, in addition to leaving offerings at the gravesites of loved ones. While the American holiday Halloween shares similar customs to Día 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 Día 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
dayofthedeatholiday.com

Day of the Dead: How Ancient Traditions Grew Into a Global Holiday
history.com/news/day-dead-dia-de-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.si.edu/2016/10/5-facts-dia-de-los-muertos-day-dead

Video from National Geographic Kids: What is Day of the Dead?
youtube.com/watch?v=_sSawpU81cl

Smithsonian Magazine: Festivals of the Dead Around the World
smithsonianmag.com/travel/festivals-dead-around-world-180953160/?page=1

Guide for Additional Resources and Crafts: Museum of Latin American Art
static1.squarespace.com/static/59b9c2b7d2b8570174037c16/t/5baee1355345oafc1658e89d/1538187579945/2018+MOLAA+Dia+de+los+Muertos+Packet.pdf

Anatomy of a Day of the Dead altar
chicagotribune.com/news/ct-day-of-the-dead-altar-diagram-spanish-english-20151029-htmlstory.html

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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.

Professional Development: Calling all educators! Expand your teaching skills, deepen your curriculum and give yourself a creative boost in NJPAC's forward-thinking professional development workshops. Our virtual PD programs are for teachers all the way from pre-K to high school, and include hip hop, dance, storytelling, theater, music and more. Not only will you learn something...you'll also have fun and be inspired.

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.

For more information or to schedule an appointment, please email our education sales team at artseducation@njpac.org. Visit njpac.org/education

Generous support for SchoolTime provided, in part, by



Major support for NJPAC Arts Education programs is provided by Stewart and Judy Colton, Toby and Leon Cooperman, Steven and Beverly Rubenstein Charitable Foundation, and The John Strangfeld and Mary Kay Strangfeld Foundation.

NJPAC Arts Education programs are made possible by the generosity of our endowment donors: The Arts Education Endowment Fund in honor of Raymond C. Chambers, The Joan and Allen Bildner Family Fund, Toby and Leon Cooperman, Albert+ and Katharine Merck+, The Sagner Companies/The Sagner Family Foundation, Wells Fargo Foundation.

Generous annual support for NJPAC Arts Education programs is provided by Atlantic, Tomorrow's Office, Broadridge Financial Solutions, Inc., Jennifer A. Chalsty, Mimi and Edwin Feliciano, Horizon Foundation for New Jersey Investors Bank, Don Katz & Leslie Larson, McCrane Foundation, Inc., care of Margrit McCrane, The MCJ Amelior Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, NJ Advance Media, NJM Insurance Group, Panasonic Foundation, PNC, Richmond County Savings Foundation, David & Marian Rocker, Santander, Turrell Fund, and an anonymous donor.

+ deceased