



Tales of Tricks and Trouble

Study Guide



STUDY GUIDE

TALES OF TRICKS AND TROUBLE

THE PLAY

Tales of Tricks and Trouble is performed by two actors and one musician. It is approximately 40 minutes long.

THE STORIES

Tales of Tricks and Trouble is a collection of four folktales from around the world. Each story shows how important tricks and surprises are in the outcomes of the stories.

The Stonecutter

This story comes from Japan and uses a circular structure common in the folktales of many cultures. Tasako is a simple stonecutter who is happy with his work until he sees a prince who has riches and power beyond anything the stonecutter has ever imagined. His happiness is transformed into envy and he turns to the Spirit of the Mountains asking him to change him into the prince. Much to his amazement, the Spirit grants his wish and the stonecutter becomes the prince. He is happy with his new wealth and power until he sees that even though he is much more powerful than he used to be, the sun is even more powerful even than he is. He becomes dissatisfied again, wishing that he could be the sun instead of the prince. The Spirit of the Mountains again grants his wish and Tasako becomes the sun. His happiness at becoming the sun only lasts a short time until he notices that when a cloud passes by the sun is covered by it. Now he wants to be the cloud instead of the sun, thinking that the cloud is most powerful, and the Mountain Spirit fulfills this new wish. Before long, Tasako is dissatisfied again when he notices that the mountain seems more powerful than the cloud. One last time the Mountain Spirit grants Tasako's wish and then leaves him. Tasako is enjoying his power as the gigantic mound of stone until a simple stonecutter, much like the one he used to be, begins to chip away at him with simple tools

The Land of Four Suns -

This story is drawn from several Chinese folk tales arranged by Wild Swan. It is the story of a village where four suns constantly shine. As you can imagine, this causes great problems for the Hani people. Their crops have burned, their rivers have dried, and they have no night time. They decide to ask Urpolo, the wisest in the land, to help them. One by one, with great cleverness, Urpolo is able to destroy three suns, leaving the last sun fearfully hiding behind a mountain. Soon, the villagers are again in distress, for they realize they must have the sun to stay alive. They try everything to persuade the sun to appear, but to know avail. Finally, the birds try singing, and it is the rooster, with its bright and honest sound, that draws the sun out. The story ends with the sun shining as the rooster crows.

It Could Always be Worse - our version written by Margot Zemach

This is a wonderful tale from Poland. A poor unfortunate man lives with his mother, his wife and his six children in one small room. He is miserable, as his home is crowded and filled with quarreling. He goes to the rabbi for advice. The rabbi tells him to bring various animals into his house to live with him. The man does this, only to find his home life worse than ever. At last, when he cannot stand it any longer, the rabbi tells him to take the animals back to their barn. The story ends with the man realizing how peaceful his house is.

Anansi and the Sky God

This story begins at a time when no stories were on the Earth but in the possession of the Sky God. In a tale from Africa, little Anansi, the spider man, wants to buy stories owned by Nyomi, the Sky God. The Sky God demands that Anansi bring him Osebo, the leopard of the terrible teeth, Umborro, the hornets that sting like fire, and Myotia, the fairy who is never seen, as the price for his stories. One by one, Anansi, again with a great deal of cleverness, is able to get what the Sky God requires. Thus, Anansi receives the box of stories and brings them back to earth. As he opens the box, the stories scatter all around the world.

MASKS

People in many cultures make and wear masks. They are used in ceremonies and dramas as well as for decorations. Sometimes masks cover the face of the wearer; other times they are worn on top of the head with the face showing. Masks are of figures important to the culture in which they are made: supernatural beings, animals, and the spirits of objects.

Sometimes the wearing of a mask is very important in a culture. The wearer is transformed into the animal or spirit of the mask he or she wears. Not all people in a community may wear the masks of supernatural beings. Other times, masks are used for more lighthearted story telling or drama and the masked figures may be tricksters or clowns. It is not uncommon for ritual and drama to be mixed together.

Many kinds of masks are used in *Tales of Tricks and Trouble*.

Half masks: Half-masks are masks that cover only part of the wearer's face. Sometimes the eyes and nose are covered, leaving the mouth visible. Othertimes, other parts of the face are covered. In the story, *In the Land of Four Sons*, the actors wear bird beaks that cover only their noses. In *Anansi and the Sky God* as well as in *the Land of Four Sons*, an actor wears masks that cover her eyes and nose. Half-masks have been used in theater for centuries because even though they transform the actor's face, many facial expressions can still be seen. The way the actor changes her facial features causes the mask to look different from one minute to the next.

Rod-Masks: Rod-masks are masks that are attached to a rod or pole that the wearer holds in her hand. The actor can become the character of the mask by holding the mask up to her face. Rod-masks can cover the whole face or just part of it. All the rod-masks in *Tales of Tricks and Trouble* are large ones that cover the whole face of the actor. You will see rod-masks in *Anansi and the Sky God* and *In the Land of Four Sons*. Because no part of the actors real face is showing, the expressions of the masks always stay the same. The actor has to move her head, arms, legs, and body in interesting ways to help give character to the mask.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why does the Stonecutter want to change? Do you think it would be fun to be someone or something different from what you are? What do you think the Stonecutter learns when he becomes the mountain and another stonecutter starts to chip away at him?

What do think it would feel like if there were four suns in our sky instead of one? What do think it would feel like if there were no sun? Were you surprised that the rooster was the one who could make the sun come back? Have you heard other stories where the rooster crowing made the sun come up?

Why do you think the Rabbi told the man to bring all the animals into his house? Why did the house feel quiet and roomy when the animals were taken out?

Anansi is smaller and weaker than the animals and the fairy that he tricks. How does he outwit them without needing to be big and strong. Do you know other stories where someone small outwitted a bigger or stronger opponent?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Make masks as part of telling or performing a story.

Locate the four areas in the world from which the folk tales originate.

Ask the class to each memorize a short poem. Take turns reciting the poem in as many different ways as possible. For example, one person could tell the poem boldly, another could sing the lines, etc.

Have one student tell a short story. Take turns re-telling the story and observe how the story changes with telling. Another variation may be telling the story adding as much color as possible. A narrates: "I walked down the street" . B retells: "I walked down the golden street."

Pass around an object, such as a ruler or piece of cloth. Ask the students to imagine what else it might be. For example, a ruler might be a magic wand, or a balance beam, or a shovel, etc. Ask the students to notice all the many ways a purple cloth is used in the various stories .

Listen to sounds made by instruments or objects in the classroom. Discuss how sounds suggest things that may be happening in the story, or can be used to inspire a story.

Grow a sweet potato by placing it in a bowl or glass of water. Use three tooth picks to hold it in place in the container, so that only about a fourth of it is immersed in the water.

Cook yams and taste. Discuss ways food helps us learn about a culture.

What other stories, from other cultures as well as our own, have a trickster character?

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