

Peter Rabbit™ Tales Show

Synopsis

At the beginning of the play, we meet the characters in our story: Peter Rabbit is grown-up and has his own garden. Peter is easily frightened and avoids anything that smacks of danger or adventure.

We also meet Peter's sister Flopsy, her husband, Benjamin Bunny, and their three baby bunnies. Living with Benjamin and Flopsy is Benjamin's father, old Mr. Bouncer, who often baby-sits for the children when Flopsy and Benjamin go out. We're also introduced to two unpleasant neighbors, Mr. Tod, the fox and Tommy Brock, the badger. Tommy Brock is a disagreeable fellow who eats worms and frogs, and Mr. Tod is disliked by everyone for his habit of nibbling on small animals. Tommy Brock and Mr. Tod are not at all fond of one another. Neighbors to the Rabbit family are Squirrel Nutkin, a cheeky squirrel who's lost his tail, and the hedgehog, Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, a kindly laundress.



Photos by Mark Garvin

As our play unfolds, Tommy Brock steals the baby bunnies while they're under Mr. Bouncer's care. Benjamin decides to set off to track the badger and find his children, and he asks Peter to join him on his quest. But Peter refuses, reminding Benjamin that he's never recovered from his frightening experience in Mr. McGregor's garden. Suddenly the lights dim, the scenery changes and the cousins are sent back to the past. The lights come up on Peter's mother, Mrs. Rabbit, his three sisters and a younger Peter in a flashback sequence that recounts Peter's escapade in Mr. McGregor's garden. Mrs. Rabbit warns Peter not to go into the garden, but Peter disobeys her and loses his coat and shoes and, almost, his life. Just as Peter is about to be caught by Mr. McGregor, he returns back to the present. Benjamin gently suggests that because of Peter's past experience, he should certainly understand how frightened the baby bunnies must feel. Reluctantly, Peter agrees to join Benjamin on his search.

When Peter and Benjamin lose Tommy Brock's trail, Benjamin gets upset at his father for letting Tommy Brock near his children. Peter reminds Benjamin how brave Mr. Bouncer was when they were young and, again, the scenery and lights change, as the cousins' travel back into the past in a second flashback sequence. Returning to Mr. McGregor's garden, the young Peter and Benjamin try to recover Peter's coat and shoes but get trapped by a cat. Mr. Bouncer suddenly arrives and fights off the cat, rescuing the young cousins. Peter and Benjamin return to the present, and Benjamin hopes that he can be as brave as his father was.

As they continue their pursuit, the rambunctious Squirrel Nutkin and the motherly Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle help Peter and Benjamin find the badger's trail. Back at home, a worried Flopsy decides to follow the cousins and join the search. Tommy Brock arrives at Mr. Tod's house and discovers that the fox is out. He makes himself at home, taking a nap in Mr. Tod's bed. Peter and Benjamin follow the badger to the fox's house, but they can't find a way in, so they dig a tunnel under the house. Suddenly, Flopsy arrives, and Peter sends her into the tunnel to join Benjamin. Just as they are about to break through into the kitchen, Mr. Tod appears, and Peter, in a panic, runs away. But when Mr. Tod enters his house and realizes that Tommy Brock is in his bed, Peter returns to save the day.

With delightful derring-do, Peter hilariously pits the badger and fox against one another and rescues the baby bunnies. The fox and the badger chase each another off into the woods and Benjamin and Flopsy are joyously reunited with their children. Peter is praised for his bravery and the rabbits travel home to Mr. Bouncer, who is forgiven for his blunder. Squirrel Nutkin and Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle join the family for a country dance, celebrating the return of the babies and Peter's return to the family fold.



**"Once upon a time
there were four little
Rabbits, and their names
were – Flopsy, Mopsy,
Cotton-tail and Peter..."**

These famous opening lines of
"The Tale of Peter Rabbit" have
enchanted young audiences
for over 100 years!

About the Tales

Our production is based on three of Beatrix Potter's "rabbit tales": *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *The Tale of Benjamin Bunny* and *The Tale of Mr. Tod*. Beatrix Potter wrote and illustrated over 24 tales and some of her most popular stories featured rabbits. When Enchantment Theatre decided to make a play based on some of Beatrix Potter's stories, we wanted to use the tales about Peter Rabbit and his family; not only are they delightful adventures, filled with humor, bravery and loyalty, but these stories are remarkably true to both animal and human nature. We recognize ourselves in Peter, Benjamin and Flopsy and are also keenly aware of the dangers they face as rabbits, both from Mr. McGregor, the farmer and Mr. Tod, the fox. Ms. Potter's stories are told with humor and wit, combined with a deep appreciation for her character's strengths and foibles. Her gorgeous illustrations perfectly evoke her animal characters and the English countryside, as they beautifully support the storytelling.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit, published in 1902, was Beatrix Potter's first book and it became an instant classic. It's the story of Peter; a naughty rabbit-child who disobeys his mother's warning and goes into Mr. McGregor's garden. Peter stuffs himself on vegetables and is almost caught by Mr. McGregor. During the chase he loses his coat and shoes but manages to escape under the garden gate. When Peter returns home, ill and exhausted, his mother puts him to bed with chamomile tea.

The Tale of Benjamin Bunny was published in 1904 and picks up where Peter's story ended. Peter's cousin, Benjamin Bunny, convinces Peter to return to Mr. McGregor's garden to retrieve his coat and shoes – Benjamin saw the McGregor's drive away in their wagon. Peter reluctantly agrees to accompany Benjamin back to the garden. The cousins find Peter's coat on a scarecrow and linger to pick vegetables to take home. But just as they're about to leave they run into the garden cat and hide under a basket. Old Mr. Bouncer comes to save the day and fights with the cat, locking it in the greenhouse. He scolds the bunnies and sends them home.



Peter sneaking into the garden



Benjamin Bunny

The Tale of Mr. Tod was published in 1912. The story features two “disagreeable people”, Mr. Tod, the fox, and Tommy Brock, the badger. In this tale, Peter, Benjamin and Flopsy are grown up and Benjamin and Flopsy have children of their own. When Tommy Brock steals Flopsy and Benjamin’s babies, Benjamin and Peter go off to rescue them. Tommy Brock doesn’t have a house of his own, so he decides to settle in Mr. Tod’s house to cook a baby bunny pie. Peter and Benjamin follow his tracks to the fox’s house, but they aren’t able to get inside. They decide to dig a tunnel under the house, when suddenly Mr. Tod appears. Mr. Tod tries to get the badger out of his house and they begin to fight and chase each other into the woods. Peter and Benjamin are able to rescue the baby bunnies and bring them back home.

There are a number of other beloved Beatrix Potter characters that we’ve introduced into our play: Squirrel Nutkin (from *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin*, published 1903) and Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle (from *The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle*, published 1905). Both of these animals help Peter and Benjamin as they search for the baby bunnies.

And look out for Jeremy Fisher, Jemima Puddle-Duck, Sally Henny-Penny, Pigging Bland and Timmy Tiptoes as they all make a brief appearance when they collect their laundry from Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle!



Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle



Squirrel Nutkin



Flopsy, Benjamin and bunnies

About the Play

In our production of *Peter Rabbit™ Tales*, we use a number of different theatrical devices to bring the story to life. Here are some of the things you and your students can expect to see:

- **Masks:** In the show, all of the actors wear animal masks to help them portray the different characters. Masks have been used in theater since its earliest beginnings, and they help to transform the actor and to transport the audience to another world.
- **Mime:** Mime is acting without speaking or making any noise. In *Peter Rabbit™ Tales*, the performers act out the story with their bodies and gestures, but they do not speak.
- **Words and Music:** There is recorded narration spoken by Susan Sweeney throughout the show to help the audience follow the story. Original music, composed by Charles Gilbert especially for this production, adds to the atmosphere.
- **Puppets:** Some of the characters in the story are played by actors wearing masks and costumes. Other characters—Mr. McGregor and his cat—are played by puppets. **ROD PUPPETS** (manipulated by sticks) will be the primary puppet device you'll see.
- **Scenery:** There will be painted curtains to evoke the world of the stories as well as set pieces representing Mr. McGregor's garden and Mr. Tod's house.
- **Lighting:** Special theatrical lights will help create the mood and the world of the story.



Photo by Mark Garvin

Note: *Very young children may be confused or even frightened by the characters wearing masks. Show them the production photos on this page and pages 15, 26 and 27 so they know what to expect. Another way to prepare is to have students experiment with masks in class. Have them silently act out different characters, actions, and emotions while wearing simple masks, and see if their classmates can guess who or what they are portraying. Talk about different ways we can communicate without using words or facial expressions. A few scenes in the show are performed in low light. Prepare children who are afraid of the dark by encouraging them to talk about their fears. Ask them to guess what parts of the story might take place when the stage is darker.*

About Beatrix Potter

Beatrix Potter is known throughout the world for her beloved animal characters and inventive tales. The particular pleasure of her stories is their truthfully humorous observation of animals and celebration of the natural world. She combined exquisite drawings with imaginative, witty and highly original story-telling. Born in 1866, Beatrix Potter came from an upper middleclass family and grew up in London. As a child, she was educated at home and had limited opportunities to spend time with other children. Her nursery became the home to a menagerie of pets that she and her brother Bertram collected. She observed her pets closely, studied their characteristics and drew them with great skill.

Through extended family vacations, first in Scotland and later in the Lake District, Beatrix fell in love with the English countryside. Her curiosity, artistic ability and keen observational skills led her to an interest in studying and drawing nature. As a young woman in the 1890s, she yearned to use her talents to find her purpose in life and gain financial and personal independence from the confines of her Victorian family. She began to sell some of her drawings for greeting cards and hoped to get one of her stories published. Her first story, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, was originally written in 1893 as a letter to cheer a sick child. In 1901 she privately published a small edition of the story when she was unable to find a publisher. The book was taken up by Frederick Warne & Company in 1902 and became an instant classic. Twenty-two tales followed, with most published over the next ten years. In 1905, Beatrix's editor, Norman Warne, asked her to marry him. Although her parent's disapproved, Beatrix accepted. Tragically Norman Warne died only a few weeks later.

Within the same year Beatrix bought Hill Top Farm in the village of Sawrey in the Lake District. She spent as much time as she could there and her illustrations of the farm and village began to appear in her tales. Working with a local solicitor, William Heelis, she began to purchase properties in the area, with the intention of preserving the farms and conserving the land. In 1913 Beatrix married William Heelis and made Sawrey her permanent home. For the next thirty years they shared a passion for farming and land preservation. When Beatrix Heelis died in 1943, at the age of 77, she left over 4,000 acres of land and fifteen farms to the National Trust of England. Brilliant artist, imaginative writer, passionate naturalist and pioneer in land conservation; Beatrix Potter shared her love of nature with millions of children through her distinctively original tales and by preserving the land that inspired them.



Beatrix Potter picture
courtesy of The National Trust



Young Beatrix Potter
courtesy of the Beatrix Potter Society

© Frederick Warne & Co



Rooftop view from Hill Top Farm from *The Tale of Samuel Whiskers*

INTRODUCING Enchantment Theatre Company

Enchantment Theatre Company exists to create original theater for young audiences and families. We accomplish this through the imaginative telling of stories that inspire, challenge and enrich our audiences, on stage and in the classroom. In doing so, we engage the imagination and spirit of our audience until a transformation occurs and the true grace of our mutual humanity is revealed.

Enchantment Theatre Company is a professional non-profit arts organization based in Philadelphia whose mission is to create original theater for children and families. For over 35 years, the Company has performed throughout the United States, Canada, and the Far East, presenting imaginative and innovative theatrical productions for school groups and families. Originally a privately owned touring company, in 2000 Enchantment put down new roots in Philadelphia, where it was reestablished as a resident non-profit theater. While dedicated to serving its home community, the Company also maintains an extensive national touring schedule that includes performances on its own and in collaboration with the nation's finest symphony orchestras.



In its home city, Enchantment has reached audiences of about 20,000 per year through its innovative and imaginative presentations of literary classics for children. Its newest program, Enchantment Everywhere, was started in the spring of 2014, and takes completely portable productions directly into school auditoriums, community centers and local venues – anywhere children and families gather - providing free tickets to thousands of children. On tour across the United States each year, the Company reaches more than 150,000 people in 35-40 states. Based on extensive experience, about 80% of the Company's touring audience is comprised of children from 5-12 who delight in the company's fantastic life-size puppets, skilled masked actors, original music, and startling feats of magic and illusion. It is to their infectious laughs, astonished gasps, and enthusiastic applause that Enchantment is dedicated.



Set model of Mr. Tod's house. Copyright © C. David Russell, Production Designer

INTRODUCTION TO Masks and Puppets

In this production of *Peter Rabbit™ Tales*, actors wearing animal masks portray all of the characters. Though masks are rare in American contemporary theater, they have been used since the very beginnings of theater. The early Romans used enormous masks that exaggerated human characteristics and enhanced the actor's presence in the huge amphitheaters of their day. Greek theater used masks that were human scale to designate tragic and comic characters. Masks have been used in the early Christian church since the 9th century and were revived during the Renaissance in Italy with the Commedia Dell' Arte. Theater throughout Asia has used masks to create archetypal characters, human and divine. In Balinese theatrical tradition, for example, masks keep ancient and mythological figures recognizable to a contemporary audience, preserving a rare and beautiful culture. Though used differently in every culture, the mask universally facilitates a transformation of the actor and the audience.

In Enchantment's productions we sometimes include very large or very small characters in our stories, so we use puppets to portray them. Similar to masks, puppets also have a long and esteemed history. They have been used to represent gods, noblemen and everyday

people as well as animals and mythical creatures. In the history of every culture puppets can be found, from the tombs of the Pharaohs to the Italian marionette and the English Punch and Judy. The Bunraku Puppet Theater of Japan has been in existence continuously since the 17th century.

In the early days of Bunraku, the greatest playwrights preferred writing for puppets rather than for live actors!

Puppets are similar to the mask in their fascination and power. We accept that this carved being is real and alive, and we invest it with an intensified life of our own imagining. Thus, puppets can take an audience further and deeper into what is true. Audiences bring more of themselves to mask and puppet theater because they are required to imagine more. Masks and puppets live in a world of heightened reality. Used with art and skill, they can free the actor and the audience from what is ordinary and mundane, and help theater do what it does at its best: expand boundaries, free the imagination, inspire dreams, transform possibilities, and teach us about ourselves.



Punch and Judy



Japanese Bunraku Puppet



Mr. Tod mask - Photo by Mark Garvin



Mr. McGregor's Cat puppet - Photo by Mark Garvin