

# *El Trato* *(The Deal)*

A Study Guide for Elementary Schools



## **PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

“El Trato” is a 50 minute assembly program that combines folk art and theatre. The presentation recounts the real life adventures of American artist, Pat Picotiano, as he travels rural Mexico to learn about mask making and the use of masks in a tradition that has remained relatively unchanged for hundreds of years. He meets Juan Horta, a mask maker from the state of Michoacán. The two artists become friends and Pat apprentices with the master carver. Together, they carve the masks and puppets used in the production and collaborate with craftsmen from neighboring villages to produce the authentic costumes worn by the puppets. These puppets are used to dramatize a Mexican folk tale, “El Trato”. The story is a vehicle to reveal aspects of life in rural Mexico that even includes a fiesta! Afterwards there is a brief question and answer session to provide the audience with the opportunity to find out more about Mexico and other facets of the production.

This program provides the audience with the opportunity to experience a variety of artistic disciplines, cultural influences, social differences and thought provoking themes. It is hoped that upon viewing this production the audience will come away with an appreciation of the following subjects.

\*\*\* Puppetry and Movement Theatre

\*\*\* Mexican Culture

\*\*\* Stories, Literature and Folk Tales

\*\*\* Learning from Books, Teachers and Experiences

\*\*\* Critical Thinking

## **SYNOPSIS OF EL TRATO**

There was once a poor woodcutter who eked out a living by cutting and gathering wood that he would sell to the people of his village. It was very hard work and he barely made enough money to feed his wife and children, and they were often hungry. At mealtimes he would notice his children watching him, hoping that he might not eat too much so that they might get a little second helping since the first had been so very small. His one wish, his secret desire, was to eat a whole chicken in peace and quiet by himself with no one staring at him. The woodcutter's wife decided to make his dream come true. She worked very hard and bought a chicken for him. She gave it to him and told him to take it out into the woods and have a special meal all by himself. As he sat by the fire roasting his chicken, the woodcutter was visited by three strangers, each of them begging for a share of his meal.

The first was a rich man who offered gold for just one wing of the chicken. But the woodcutter said, "I don't want your gold...I want meat! You don't know how much this chicken is worth." And the rich man disappeared into the woods. The second visitor was a pilgrim who said he needed food to continue on his holy journey. The woodcutter refused him as well saying, "Pilgrim, I'm no better off than you are. You should look for your charity from those who can afford it." And the pilgrim also vanished into the woods. The third and last visitor was Death, Doña Muerte, who said she was hungry. The woodcutter decided to share his chicken with her replying, "Eat, at least you treat everyone equally...Death escapes no one." Death made a deal (el trato) with the woodcutter for being kind to her. She made him a healer, but he had to obey her rules and she warned him never to trick her. The woodcutter became famous and healed many people until one day he tried to trick Doña Muerte. Watch the play closely to see what happens to the woodcutter!

## **SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION**

**MULTICULTURALISM-** This program is based on the exploration into the life and traditions of another culture. American society is made up of people from various cultural origins. "El Trato" focuses on the influence that rural Mexican village life can have on a contemporary American artist.

- Why is it important to learn about other cultures?
- Can you trace the cultural origins in your family?
- What are some influences that Mexican culture has had on American culture?

**APPRENTICESHIP-** An apprenticeship is the time spent while learning a craft under a skilled master craftsman. The techniques used in the production of folk art in Mexico is still passed on in this way.

- How do we in the United States learn a skill or craft?
- What might be an advantage of having only one teacher?
- What are other ways of learning about a topic?

**FOLK ART-** A traditional or primitive art form often passed on within a localized community, within a family or practiced by self taught artists is considered folk art.

- Can you think of some examples of American folk art?
- Why might some cultures have a greater variety of folk art than others?
- Are there skills passed on within your community or family?

**HUNGER-** The main character in the play is so poor that he barely has enough to eat. Many people throughout the world go hungry every day, others are undernourished or even die from lack of food.

- What might be some causes of hunger in the world today?
- Can you suggest some ways of ending hunger?
- Have you ever been as hungry as the character in the story?

**JUSTICE-** Another theme in the story was the injustice the woodcutter felt. He was so poor while others were rich; some people were healthy while others were sick. The fact is, life is not always fair.

- Can you think of some experiences in which you were not treated fairly?
- What are some other examples of injustice in the world today?
- How might we correct injustice and unfair treatment?

**MEXICO-** Mexico is a colorful country inhabited for centuries by ancient civilizations. Since the arrival of the Spanish, the country has blended ancient ritual with European tradition. The present day country reflects the combination of these two influences.

- What are some examples of Mexican culture that you can identify?
- Even though we share a common border with Mexico why do you think our countries are so different?
- In what ways has Mexican culture influenced our own?

**FIESTAS-** A fiesta is a party or festival that is celebrated in Mexico. Many fiestas require the preparation and participation of a whole village to carry on a three or four day celebration. Live music is always present during a fiesta. Many fiestas can include such activities as, a dance, rodeo, fire works display, mask play, religious service or craft fair.

- What are some examples of holidays or festivals that we celebrate?
- What are some activities we might participate in during one of our festivals?
- What would be some reasons for celebrating?

**MASKS-** A mask is something used to conceal or disguise the face. In Mexico, masks have played an important part in the social, religious, and recreational lives of people since pre-Columbian times. In the past, masks were worn in ritual dances and used by dancers to represent person or animals.

- What kinds of material could be used to make masks?
- What are some of the occasions when we would wear masks?
- Can you name other countries that use masks in celebrations?

**PUPPETS-** A puppet is an inanimate figure that is made to move by human effort before an audience. The first requirement of a puppet is that it move. The power of a puppet lies with it's ability to express with subtle or exaggerated gesture.

- How is a puppet similar or different from a machine, doll or human actor?
- What are some puppet characters that you can identify?
- Can you explain the different ways of operating a puppet?

**FOLK TALES-** Folk tales are part of every culture. Popular characters and themes spring up in stories that are passed on from generation to generation. "El Trato" was adapted from a cuento (story) brought over to America by the Spaniards.

- Can you think of any other folk tales from other countries?
- Who are popular characters in our own folk tales?
- Do stories in your own family get passed on?

## **The Day of the Dead/*Día de los Muertos***

For the first two days of November a sweet-smelling cloud of copal incense hangs over most of Mexico. The Day of the Dead is being celebrated. Nominally this is the Christian feast of All Saints' and All Souls', but it is celebrated in Mexico as nowhere else in the Catholic world. The Mexican festival of *Todos Santos* (All Saints'), also called *Día* or *Días de Los Muertos* (Day or Days of the Dead), is the most important celebration in the yearly cycle. This is especially so in rural areas, where the preparations in anticipation of the event are a major preoccupation for much of the year.

The Day of the Dead in Mexico is essentially a private or family feast. It has a public aspect at community level, but the core of the celebration takes place within the family home. It is a time of family reunion not only for the living but also the dead who, for a few brief hours each year, return to be with their relatives in this world.

As a time of reunion, there is nothing somber or macabre about the event: the returning souls do not bring the odor of death and the grave with them, but come as spirits who have returned from another world, which for many Mexican Indians is very much like this one. These worlds of the living and the dead exist in a state of permanent interaction.

The most widely held belief is that the souls of children return first, and food and gifts appropriate to their age and tastes will be set out for them. When the children withdraw, the souls of the adult dead are in turn offered the goods and drinks they preferred in life. The adult dead return on 1 November and are, in their turn, given the most splendid offering of foods and drinks the family can afford.

Death is represented in the story of El Trato by the character of Doña Muerte. How a Mexican's treatment of death different from ours in the United States?

Can you think of other cultures that treat death differently from us?

In what ways do we honor our dead and remember or celebrate their lives?

## **VOCABULARY**

el trato- deal, agreement

lenador- woodcutter

curandero- healer

la muerte- death

frijoles- beans

tortillas- ground corn patty

hijos- children in the same family

nino- child

toro- bull

madera- wood

herramienta- tool

machete- large heavy knife

casa- house

artesania- folk art, craft

pueblo- village, people

comida- food

fiesta- party, festival

campo- field

campesino- field worker

muchacha- girl

muchacho- boy

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## **NOTES**

# The Making Of El Trato



The puppets, masks and folk art used in El Trato were made in Mexico in the villages around Lake Pátzcuaro in the state of Michoacán. Michoacán is one of Mexico's most interesting states. It is a beautiful mountainous region extending over part of the Sierra Madre Occidental mountain range in west-central Mexico and down to the Pacific coast.

Home to the Purépeche Indians also called Tarascans, the mountains are cool and pleasant, descending to the more tropical coast.

Many of Michoacan's towns specialize in unique handicrafts passed

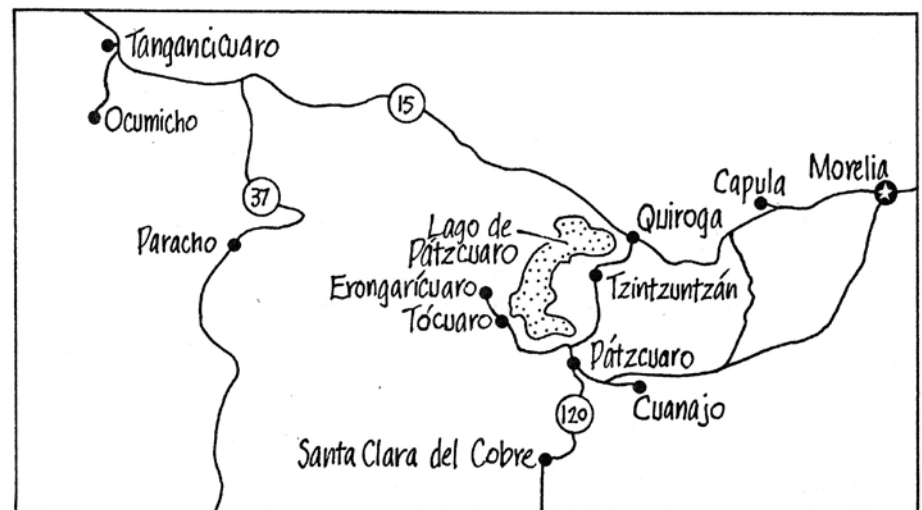
down through the centuries, making the mountains of Michoacan a patchwork quilt of tradition. Pátzcuaro, once the capital of the Purepeche empire, is now a hub of activity for the the artisans and compesinos that live in the villages that surround the lake that shares ths same name.

## The Villages

**ERONGARÍCUARO-** is known for it's fine hand woven textiles or *mantas*; this is where Dona Marina Ruiz designed and sewed the costumes used in the production.

**MORELIA-** is the capital of Michoacán; many supplies and articles like minature sandals were located in this colonial city.

**PÁTZCUARO-** is famous for it's Friday indian market that draws villagers and their wares. This is where the hat maker was contracted to make the minature *sombreros*.



**TÓCUARO-** is a woodworkers village and home to Juan Horta. This is where the puppets and masks were carved.