

**Matching Tension and Balance --**  
*Peking Acrobats*



Peking Acrobats SchoolTime performances

Monday, December 2, 2019 at 11am

Zellerbach Hall, University of California, Berkeley

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# How to use this Engagement Guide

If you have photos or lesson plans to share, please let us know! Use #PekingAcrobats@Cal.

We invite you to challenge yourself and your students to think with the curiosity and passion of the arts. This engagement guide is organized around four key artistic practices (as identified by the National Coalition for Core Arts Standards at <http://nccas.wikispaces.com/>)

**Investigating:** Questioning, exploring and challenging.

**Imagining:** Opening the door to what's possible, and even to what seems impossible.

**Creating:** Making artistic choices with a work of art in mind.

**Connecting:** Reflecting on both process and product and making connections to other aspects of life and study.

You'll be able to link on specific subjects that you or your students may want more information about. The body of the Engagement Guide invites exploration before and after the performance, giving each student tools to make personal and meaningful connections during the show.

We've included pre-performance engagement activities and a post-performance activity for artistic practice and reflection. By no means should you feel limited by these suggestions! Go, make art, learn more...and share your experiences where you can.

**Artistic Literacy:** Having the skills and knowledge you need to connect meaningfully with works of art—that's what we mean by artistic literacy. We think that means something different than knowing the names of all the different instruments musicians might play, or being able to reproduce the exact melodies you might hear during a show. To us at Cal Performances, it means you and your students will have a significant glimpse into the artistic process and will have a chance to try to solve the problems the artists aim to solve creatively. It means that the next time you see a performance, you'll be able to use these same insights to connect with a work of art through the artist's process and that this will deepen your experience as an audience member.

The artistically literate student audiences come to understand that every artist draws from a core set of concepts skillfully chosen and applied in performance to create a work of art both unique to the artist, and connected to other works of art.

And along the way, we hope that students of all ages—and their teachers and adult mentors—will be inspired to experiment with artistic decision-making and creativity themselves.

**Enjoy the show!**

# Your ★ STARRING Role in the Theater



As an audience member, you are a STAR, too! You play an important role in the performance community. The artists need YOU in order to give you their best work.

## S.T.A.R. Audiences

**S = Support** the artists by being attentive and focusing on the performers.

**T = Tune in:** listen and watch for understanding (and for the Peking Acrobats watch for how the acrobats build a sense of tension and suspense in their acts.)

**A = Appreciate** the performers by clapping at the right time. For example, when a scene or dance ends, or when the stage lights fade to dark.

**R = Respect** the performers and other audience members. At a performance, you, the others in the audience and the artists are sharing this experience together and are part of a performance community. Think about ways you can best support the community's performance experience.

We know you will be a STAR today and will help your classmates shine too!

# About the Peking Acrobats

From the People's Republic of China, the Peking Acrobats are known for visually stunning, theatrically staged acts of astounding acrobatics. Contortionists bend like rubber, while acrobats and jugglers perform amazing balancing and aerial acts, spin plates, create a bicycle pagoda and juggle everything from hats to jars using their hands, feet and sometimes their entire bodies.

These polished performances of physical bravura and daredevil courage evolved from an ancient folk art that used common, everyday objects. Like today's sign dancers standing on street corners and pointing passersby to nearby stores, people got more attention at markets when they displayed their wares in unusual ways - balancing pots or bowls, stacking chairs or juggling umbrellas. Hoop diving also emerged through finding play in work, field workers challenged each other to dive through grain separators after removing the tool's woven bottom.

Like most Chinese acrobats, members of the Peking Acrobats begin learning their craft at around age five or six then undergo years of intensive training in order to develop the impeccable timing, control, coordination and grace the art form demands.

Under the direction and choreography of Hai Ken Tsai, who hails from three generations of Chinese acrobats, the company is accompanied onstage by live musicians playing traditional Chinese instruments. These include the erhu (small bowed instrument with two strings), pipa (lute-like string instrument), dizi (flute made of bamboo) and the yangqin (dulcimer played with bamboo mallets.)

Look for some of the Peking Acrobats "signature acts" at the SchoolTime performance:

- **Spinning Plates:** Acrobats spin plates on iron sticks while simultaneously balancing, dancing and tumbling.
- **Contortion:** Performers squeeze their bodies into tiny spaces and twist into unbelievable shapes while delicately balancing objects.
- **Hoop Diving:** With dynamic speed and rhythm, acrobats jump, dive and tumble through stacked hoops up to seven feet high.
- **Balancing:** Performers balance precariously perched items on various parts of their bodies and balance themselves on large and small objects.
- **Aerial Acts:** Using leather straps or strips of silk acrobats perform feats of strength and daring high in the air.
- **Double Pole:** A group of acrobats climb up and down thin poles to execute a variety of dangerous movements. This act requires a considerable amount of upper body and abdominal strength.
- **Juggling:** A team of acrobats juggle, throw and catch hats with amazing speed, synchronization and dexterity. Others juggle jars, tables, umbrellas and other household objects with their feet.
- **Lion Dance:** This act comes from a Chinese folk dance developed from Buddhist beliefs. A symbol of strength and happiness, the lion also represents good fortune and renewal,

qualities evoked through the dance. Big Lion is played by two acrobats, while Small Lion is played by one.

- **Bicycle:** Acrobats perform on moving bicycles creating a human pyramid, pagoda and other stunning shapes and images.
- **Finale:** the entire company comes onstage to create striking stage pictures and to perform spectacular balancing and tumbling acts.



# Artistic Concept: Tension and Balance

*How do the performers in the Peking Acrobats use tension and balance in their amazing acrobatic acts?*

This engagement guide provides some classroom activities to help heighten your and your students' awareness of the various ways we see tension and balance in our daily lives (and in literature, science and PE classes too!) And when you come see the Peking Acrobats performers on stage, you and they will be able to notice not just that you are surprised and delighted, but how the artists made that happen for you—by using tension and balance as they perform solo, in duets and in groups.

**Tension** is one aspect of life that most of us could do without. In art, however, tension is a creative force that invites audiences into the work of art in a powerful way. We're not talking creative tension where artists are in conflict with one another, but tension as an artistic concept that shows up on stage for the audience to engage with.

In the physical world, **tension is the act or process of stretching something tight**. It's often described as a force which tends to stretch or elongate something. It can be experienced as the stretching of an object in opposite directions, as in the rope that is used in a game of tug-of-war.

In the performing arts, **tension is akin to a feeling of suspense, a kind of uncertainty about and interest in the outcome of certain actions**. In dance and acrobatics, we see tension in the bodies of the performers as they stretch, climb, bend, roll and move in ways we don't often see in real life. And tension is also created with and around objects, as they hold the performers up or move around unexpectedly. Or as the performers balance, juggle or suspend everyday objects in extraordinary ways.

We as audience are also in a state of suspension and tension: we're waiting to see if the artists can accomplish the challenge they set themselves and if their partners and team members will be there for them (thank goodness they always are!) Our satisfaction comes when the tension is resolved into balance and we see what human beings are really capable of when they push themselves, prepare properly, and trust one another.

There's another point of tension here: like a Jenga tower, as the performers pile on the number of chairs, plates, jumping hoops and bicycle riders they both heighten the sense of risk and tension and pleasingly complete the stage picture. Paradoxically, the final moment when the stage picture gratifyingly clicks into place is the very moment when the act seems most thrillingly dangerous. So, the audience feels the disequilibrium of holding two opposing emotions – delight and nervousness – simultaneously.

It's a fun and interesting artistic concept—tension—and when you know how to look for it, you can increase your enjoyment of the performance.

# Engagement Activities

## Engagement Activity #1 (Pre-performance) TENSION AND BALANCE: Artistic Exploration

### Guiding Questions

How can we create tension playfully with our bodies?

What is the interaction between tension and balance?

What are ways objects are used as props and partners in acrobatic acts?

### Artistic Literacy Tool Box

Attentive listening. Balance. Tension. Balance.

### Overview

**Time needed: 20-30 minutes** (can be extended with layers of exploration).

Students will explore tension and balance in their own bodies, and with a partner.

### Supplies and Prep

- Open space for students to stand and move around a bit (no large dance movements required).
- Selected everyday props (e.g., plastic plates, 4-6" inflatable balls, plastic bowls, rulers, etc.)
- Writing materials for students (journal, paper, writing implements).

### Instructions

**Step 1** Start with everyone standing, preferably in a circle if there's room. **Ask students to stand in a balanced position:** with their feet planted firmly on the floor about shoulder's width apart, back straight, arms down to the side and relaxed. Notice how you are balanced. (If accommodation is needed, ask students to find whatever position they can be in that feels as balanced as possible.)

**Note:** Balance shifts can also be experienced sitting in a chair, or even on the floor.

**Step 2** Now gently take yourself off balance (*coach if needed: Lift one foot and the opposite arm. Stick your bottom out as far as you can without falling over. Bend your knees then go on tip-toe. If sitting in a chair, how far can you lean forward or to either side without falling over? What happens when you lift your foot or raise an arm while leaning?*)

How do you have to hold your body to keep from falling over?  
Notice where there is tension in your body, and how it helps you keep your balance.



Come back to a balanced position (balance), and find a new way to be gently off-balance.

Where is the tension now?

Come back to balance.

**Step 3**

**Discuss:** Where did you feel tension in your body when you were off-balance?  
What felt different when you were balanced?  
How did you know you were off-balance?

**Step 4**

**Work with a partner to explore tension and balance together.**



a) Choose a student to demonstrate with. Ask everyone to turn to a partner. Demonstrate facing a partner and grasping one another gently but firmly around both wrists.

b) Demonstrate carefully leaning away from one another, holding firmly and finding balance as you move. Be sure not to move any faster than your partner. Stick together and find balance. Then come back to balance and find a new position to balance each other.

c) Following the demo, encourage students to explore finding balance with different positions – crouching slightly, on their knees, linking elbows side by side. Coach them to notice where they have tension in their bodies.

they have tension in their bodies.

d) They can talk quietly with one another as they figure out how to balance each other. Laughter is to be expected, but don't let go of your partner! Stay together.

e) **Come back to the circle. Discuss** what you noticed about tension and balance while working with a partner. **Discuss** the importance of trust and paying attention to your partner while achieving balance. **How** did you know when you were balanced together? **What** did you have to do to achieve the right balance?

f) Try balancing an object on the top of your head. Keeping a prop balanced there requires holding your body in balance with a certain tension and attentiveness, and constant adjustments. A plastic plate may be relatively easy to balance on your head – can you balance two? Five? Ten? What adjustments need to be made with added plates?

**Step 5 (Optional)**

**Observations on Balance**

- a) Use a swing or see-saw and notice:  
What does your body need to do to make the swing or see-saw move?  
How do you find your balance?  
Why don't you fall off when you're doing it right?
- b) Think back, what was the hardest thing about learning how to ride a bike, scooter, roller skates or a skateboard? Recreate the standing challenge by standing on both legs, then lifting one leg. Can you tilt while standing on one leg? What are all the ways you can get your balance back? (Like holding onto a friend, the back of a chair, a wall.)
- c) Consider how you distribute your weight, the points of contact that provide stability (floor, another person, chair.) So much of our movement requires balance, that's why as babies we need practice to learn how to walk. Even sitting upright in a chair, moving from sitting to standing is an act of balance!
- d) Share your observations on finding balance in a journal or with a partner.

**Step 6**

**Watch short videos of the performance before you come to the live Show and look for tension and balance:**

<https://calperformances.org/performances/2019-20/family/peking-acrobats.php>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3EG2PVRTJYo&t=5s>

**Step 7 (Optional)** Check out the photo below, or other photos in this guide, to ask students where they see physical tension, where they see balance, and how the performers draw attention to tension and balance?



### Step 8 Ways to prepare your students to focus at the performance

Audiences are invited at the performance to connect what they will see and hear to their own creative process, and watch and listen to the choices the artists have made.

**Ask students to select one or more of the focusing questions to use while they watch and listen to the performance. Because so much is happening on stage, a focusing question can bring you back to a central idea that can help you make meaning that is both fun and interesting to you.**

- How do the performers draw our attention to a specific moment in an act?
- How did the performers focus the audience's attention to the tension being created?
- How did the acrobats use objects in their acts?
- How did seeing how the objects were used in the performance change the way you think or feel about the object in everyday life?

### Step 9 After the performance

Encourage students to connect their expectations before the performance to their actual experiences: what did they see and hear? What surprised them? What seemed a little familiar? What seemed really strange? What questions would they want to ask the artists if they could? What artistic advice might they share with someone who was going to see the performance?



## Engagement Activity #2 (Post-Performance)

### TENSION AND BALANCE IN THE PEKING ACROBATS: Reflection & Artistic Exploration

#### Guiding Questions

How do the Peking Acrobats use the artistic tools of tension and balance?

Where did we see tension between people, or between people and objects?

How does the way the acrobats use everyday objects in their acts add to the performance?

#### Artistic Literacy Tool Box

Attentive listening and responding. Tension. Balance.

#### Overview

**Time needed: 20-30 minutes** (can be extended with layers of exploration).

Students will reflect on the Peking Acrobats performance in kinesthetic and interpersonal ways.

They will explore using the creative tools of tension and balance.

#### Supplies and Prep

- Open space for students to stand and move around a bit (no large movements required).
- Writing materials for students (journal, paper, writing implements)

#### Instructions

**Step 1**      **At their desks, ask students to think back** to the Peking Acrobats performance and jot or sketch some of their memories of the performance.

- a) Where did you see tension and balance in how the Peking Acrobats moved?
- b) Where did you see tension and balance in how the Peking Acrobats performers related to one another?
- c) What relationship did objects have in creating tension and balance?
- d) Ask students to share what was most memorable to them.

**Step 2**      **Have everyone come to a standing circle.**

Ask students to think of the performers from the Peking Acrobats and how they moved. Go around the circle as each student demonstrates a moment of tension or balance that they saw. After a student shows a movement, the whole group repeats the movement.

You might consider seeking curricular connections in physical science, math or literature. If you design a lesson that you'd like to share, please let us know! We'd like to include it on our blog or in future workshops for teachers...

# Resources

## Websites:

Peking Acrobats: <http://www.chineseacrobats.com/pa.php>

30-second spot and the Peking Acrobats, Behind the Scenes:

<https://calperformances.org/performances/2019-20/family/peking-acrobats.php>

## Books:

The Best of Chinese Acrobatics (Paperback) 1989, Yan Qiubai, Foreign Languages Press  
ISBN-13: 978-7119007502

## Other Circus, Acrobat and Dance Performers:

[www.Cirque du Soleil.com](http://www.Cirque-du-Soleil.com)

[www.7fingers.com/shows/creations/cuisine-confessions](http://www.7fingers.com/shows/creations/cuisine-confessions)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpqDgPbsVTE&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpqDgPbsVTE&feature=related)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=C\\_BGSet0TWc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_BGSet0TWc)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAt1h5ftOps](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAt1h5ftOps)

[www.redpanda2000.com/index2.htm](http://www.redpanda2000.com/index2.htm)

[www.shenyunperformingarts.org/ca/index](http://www.shenyunperformingarts.org/ca/index)





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For information on supporting our Artistic Literacy (Education & Community) Programs, contact: [donate@calperformances.org](mailto:donate@calperformances.org).



## **About Cal Performances and the Cal Performances Classroom**

The mission of Cal Performances is to produce and present performances of the highest artistic quality, enhanced by programs that explore compelling intersections of education and the performing arts. Cal Performances celebrates over 100 years on the UC Berkeley Campus.

### **What is a Cal Performances Classroom?**

*Your classroom, of course!*

The arts are an endlessly replenishable resource for a lifelong love affair with thinking, learning and feeling across disciplines and cultures. They connect fluidly with curriculum throughout the school years, and – perhaps with more endurance – they connect us to ideas and reflection on human experience that can't be easily expressed any other way.

Each season at Cal Performance, you will find a menu of compelling performances and classroom opportunities for any age. You can create your Cal Performances classroom through any or all of our artistic literacy programs for grades K-12.

Cal Performances holds artistic literacy on a par with language and numerical literacy. Those who are artistically literate hold the keys to a lifelong engagement with the arts, able to unlock and make personal connections to any work of art, regardless of level of familiarity with the work and the artists.

Artistic literacy skills are developed in the Cal Performances classroom as students and teachers are engaged in the artist's process. These skills are embedded in everything we do, from pre-performance talks to community conversations to teacher workshops and artist visits to the classroom.

### **Cal Performances Department of Artistic Literacy Staff:**

Sabrina Klein, Director, Artistic Literacy

Rica Anderson, Manager, Student Engagement

Marilyn Stanley, Administrative Coordinator

David McCauley, Master Teaching Artist in Dance (and Artistic Director, AileyCamp)

Laura Abrams, Manager, Artistic Residencies and Public Programs