

Minty Fresh Circus

Flynn Student Matinee Series Study Guide



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About the Artists

Minty Fresh Circus is a US-based circus show performed by an all-Black cast, made by a majority-Black creative team. The show celebrates the healing power of Black music and movement, infused with the joy and resilience of those who traversed the transatlantic slave trade.



The performers of Minty Fresh Circus

Since its premier earlier this year, the show has been [described](#) as “a raucous, playful imagination of circus and dance.” The title for the show, as explained by creator Monique Martin in [this video introducing the work of the company](#), came from two places. “Minty” was a nickname for abolitionist Harriet Tubman, whose life and legacy are a primary inspiration for the show. And “fresh” because “Black people have always had to reinvent themselves, so they are perpetually fresh,” says Martin.

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CIRCUS**



Creator Monique Martin

The project was conceived by artist, curator, and producer Monique Martin and features choreography by Adesola Osakalumi and Traci Bartlow. This all-ages, 60-minute show is structured in a series of eight rituals: Departure, Arrival, Learning, Conjuring, Surrender, Adornment, Afrofuturism, and Joy. It’s a time-bending journey exploring themes of Black liberation, imagination, ritual, and sovereignty through circus and dance. Minty Fresh Circus features seven performers, and the brand-new show premiered in January of 2025 at Philadelphia’s Annenberg Center.

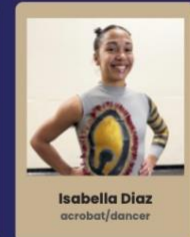
MEET THE CAST



Lex Alston
clown/dancer



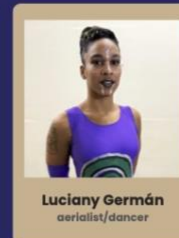
Julia Baccelleri
aerialist/dancer



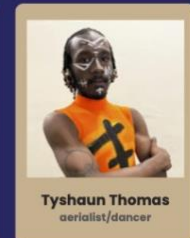
Isabella Diaz
acrobat/dancer



Hezekiah "Z Loco" Farrel
acrobat/dancer



Luciany Germán
aerialist/dancer



Tyshaun Thomas
aerialist/dancer



Ian "Drowzee" Robinson
dancer

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Themes of Liberation

“Music is our witness, and our ally. The beat is the confession which recognizes, changes, and conquers time. Then, history becomes a garment we can wear and share, and not a cloak in which to hide; and time becomes a friend.”

– James Baldwin

As Minty Fresh Circus [creator Monique Martin says](#), “This circus is an exploration and a celebration of Black music as medicine. What would a circus look like in the Underground Railroad? And thinking of it from a liberated space versus a space of suppression, structural violence, all the things that are in our consciousness about this history on this land. And I wanted to lift up the joy. There had to have been joy, because you cannot survive that level of violence without some access to joy. So how do you access that joy? Through music and through dance.”

The central question behind this show is: *What does freedom feel and sound like if your only access to it is through your imagination?*



Sankofa heart

One of the core themes in this show is Sankofa, a Ghanaian concept that means “go back and get it” or “it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.” The notion encourages us to learn from the past in order to inform the future. It’s represented visually through a system of symbols called [Adinkra](#), which are used to represent lessons and ideas. These symbols originate from the Gyman people of the African countries Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire. Sankofa is sometimes represented as a bird, other times as a heart. In



Sankofa bird

the show, you’ll see that all the performers’ costumes have the image of an Adinkra symbol!

Another key theme in the show is [Afrofuturism](#). The term was coined in 1994 by cultural critic Mark Dery in his essay “Black to the Future” where he wrote: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” Afrofuturism has grown into a cultural movement blending



The Smithsonian Museum’s Afrofuturism exhibit. Learn more [here!](#)

science fiction, history, and African heritage to reimagine Black futures. Through art, storytelling, and performance, this movement challenges dominant historical narratives and envisions new possibilities for Black existence. As Ryan Coogler, creator of the Afrofuturist Marvel film Black Panther puts it, Afrofuturism is “a way to bridge the cultural aspects of the ancient African traditions with the potential of the future.”

Through the eight movements that make up the Minty Fresh Circus performance, the show creates “oasis spaces,” fertile sanctuary spaces where Black and brown folks can find refuge from labor, capitalism, and oppression. In these spaces, rest is not only allowed but respected as an act of resistance, as a key to liberation.

Tricia Hersey, an artist, educator, and theologian, created a framework of “rest as resistance” and founded The Nap Ministry, becoming a leading voice in the movement of to understand the liberating power of rest. You can hear more about this movement from Tricia Hersey (aka The Nap Bishop) in [this interview from NPR’s Life Kit](#).

In building the performance, the creators explored how to bring concepts of healing into the physical vocabulary of the performers. These methods are weightlessness, vibration, surrender, empowerment, and singing/vocalizing. As you watch the show, try to notice how many times you see or feel these sensations from the performers, and how many different ways they manifest.



The Nap Bishop, Tricia Hersey, taking a nap

Minty Fresh Circus even has a Spotify playlist – check it out [here](#)!

Inspiration & Lineages

“We see our muse, Harriet Tubman, as the original Afrofuturist. Using her imagination, will, and her faith, her condition of bondage transcended the physical limitations of enslavement. She saw herself free and was determined to achieve it for herself and her family.”

– Minty Fresh Circus creators

The life and courage of [Harriet Tubman](#) is the inspiration behind this show, and the creators of Minty Fresh Circus call her their muse. An abolitionist and social activist, Tubman was born in March of 1822 on a plantation in Dorchester County, Maryland. She was born Araminta Ross – her family gave her the nickname “Minty.” She was only 12 years old when she intervened in a physical fight between an overseer and another enslaved person, and she was hurt badly in the process, which led to a lifetime of medical challenges. As a result of her health condition, she took assignments on the plantation which required her to explore the geographical areas surrounding the plantation and to meet Black sailors.



Harriet Tubman



A map of the Underground Railroad

This knowledge would later become crucial to her work on the Underground Railroad, a network of secret routes and safe houses that helped enslaved African Americans escape to free states and Canada during the 19th century. In 1849, she escaped the plantation and made it to Pennsylvania on the Underground Railroad. She then became a conductor, helping other enslaved people escape and using her geographical expertise to increase the efforts for freedom and justice.

She saved many lives and never lost a passenger, and played a crucial role in the North’s victory in the Civil War as part of their espionage efforts.

The performance also includes a portion of a speech by another important historical figure – the Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The speech you’ll hear a snippet of is called “Where Do We Go From Here,” in which he speaks about actions for social change. Watch his whole speech [here](#).

Many traditions of Black music and dance also play a key role in this show. A common theme across many of these traditions is adaptation and the quest for liberation in the face of oppression. For example, enslaved Africans in the United States were banned from using drums

– an essential element of music and dance across African cultures – and so they turned to their bodies instead, using hand clapping, stomping, and finger snapping to create rhythms. Similarly, it was common in the days of enslavement for plantation owners to deliberately mix people from different African nations, in order to prevent them from speaking their native languages. So enslaved people in the U.S.’ Gullah Islands developed stick pounding – coding messages in the rhythms they would beat with corn sticks during their work, in order to communicate. During these times, enslaved Africans were not allowed to practice their spiritual or religious traditions, and so they would secretly gather in places called Hush Arbors, where they could celebrate births, deaths, and practice their traditions. These meetings would also include practices such as dance, and include African shouts and rhythms. Negro spirituals originated from these Hush Arbor spaces, creating a double meaning in the songs’ themes of freedom – religious salvation as well as freedom from slavery.



The painting "A Plantation Burial" by John Antrobus, depicting a Hush Arbor

Lindy Hop is a dance style you’ll see in the show. This is a form of social dance that emerged in Black communities in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Harlem, NYC. The dance is rooted in African rhythms, combined with European partner dance traditions, blending Charleston, tap dance, and jazz rhythms.



Lindy Hop dancers featured in Life Magazine in 1943

Minty Fresh Circus also includes many elements of hip hop music and dance. Hip hop developed in the 1970s in the Bronx. This was a time when the optimism of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had faded and Black and brown folks living in low-income areas in NYC – the Bronx especially – were facing extreme poverty as city officials slashed basic services, school funding, and job training programs. Hip hop was born out of this environment as a form of expression in which young people experimented with new styles of poetry, music, and dance as a way to share their

thoughts and feelings. Hip hop is known for driving beats and electronic sounds like record scratches; for mixing in other genres like jazz; and for incorporating or sampling other forms of expression like quotes and speeches. You’ll see breaking in the show, as well as other styles of

hip hop dance. Breaking mixes super-quick footwork with body twisting, robotic movements, smooth whole-body waves, acrobatics and freezes.

Learn more about hip hop's history and some of the moves and sounds you'll experience [here](#)!

As Monique Martin [says](#), “one of the metaphors that I’m using is flight patterns of birds. And that also amplifies the idea of non-verbal communication and how Black folks have had to move in silence, move without amplifying their emotions. That also looks at the Great Migration, folks moving from the South to the North, that was a quiet journey.” The Great Migration occurred in the early 20th century, as Black Americans facing disenfranchisement, poverty, and racist Jim Crow laws moved to Northern cities seeking economic and social opportunities.

Another form of non-verbal communication that serves as part of the movement vocabulary in the show is the dap. During the Vietnam War, Black soldiers were prohibited from making the Black Power symbol of a raised fist. So they created the handshake known as dap, which means dignity and pride.



American soldiers in Vietnam greeting each other with the dap

Context: Circus Arts

And... it's a circus! When you hear the word circus, what do you think of? Maybe it's a big striped tent, a ringleader, trained animals, even a human cannonball. In 1768, a British man named Philip Astley created the first circus when he combined many pre-existing performance elements, including trick-riding, clowning, and juggling, into one large performance all done within a circular area he called a ring. Many other circus owners followed his lead and it quickly became a popular form of entertainment. In the United States, circuses evolved into traveling shows with large tents. In 1871, P.T. Barnum revolutionized the industry by incorporating sideshows and using railroads for transportation, and adding a new focus on spectacle over artistry.



Ephraim Williams

Black entrepreneur and circus owner Ephraim Williams faced many challenges in a deeply segregated America as he developed a Black circus in the 19th and early 20th centuries. After spending years performing, he founded several of his own circuses, including the Ferguson & Williams Monster Show and the Professor Ephraim Williams Great Northern Circus. White audiences and competitors,

unaccustomed to seeing a Black man in a leadership role, put up a lot of resistance for Williams, but he remained determined. In 1910 he developed the “Silas Green from New Orleans” show, an all-Black tent circus which became one of the longest-running tent shows in U.S. history. Despite his success, segregation and racism meant Black circus performers continued to face huge challenges, often kept in the background or performing roles that relied on racial stereotyping.

The circus world is still white-dominated today, but in addition to Minty Fresh there are other circuses whose mission is to highlight and celebrate Black talent, including UniverSOUL Circus, which was founded in 1994 in Atlanta and is still performing across the country. In Minty Fresh Circus you'll see trapeze artists, unicycles, juggling, acrobatics, and so much more. Here are some of the circus skills and equipment you can expect to see!

Acrobat: An athlete with strong gymnastic skills, such as flipping and tumbling.

Aerial Silks: A fabric hung from the ceiling from which performers hang and perform acrobatics.



Minty Fresh Acrobats

Base: The performer on the bottom of a multi-person trick; they lift, catch, and assist the flyer.

Flyer: Someone who performs in the air while being supported, suspended, thrown, or caught by another flyer or base.

Juggling: Keeping several objects in motion by tossing and catching them.

Lyra: A steel hoop hung from the ceiling, on which artists perform acrobatics.

Trapeze: A horizontal bar that hangs in the air and can be used by acrobats.

Tumbling: Doing gymnastics, such as somersaults, with just one's own body (no outside equipment).

Unicycle: A bicycle with only one wheel.



Minty Fresh Circus showing off their lyra and aerial silk skills!

Reflection Questions:

Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:

Before the Show:

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think of circus, what comes to mind?
- How would you define freedom? What does it look like?
- Do you think circus and dance can tell a story? How?

After the Show:

- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?
- In the show, the performers tell the audience “Joy is subversive; music is medicine” and “The key to freedom is your imagination.” What do you think that means?
- What historical events or figures did you learn about in the show? Why do you think the creators chose to include these historical voices?
- How did the show expand your understanding of circus arts?

Resources

- [Minty Fresh Circus Teaser](#)
- [Minty Fresh Circus Debuts in Philly \(Philadelphia Tribune\)](#)
- [Kennedy Center’s Minty Fresh Circus Learning Guide](#)
- [Adinkra Symbols and Meaning](#)
- [Meet the Minty Fresh Circus Cast \(PDF link at bottom of page\)](#)
- [Inside the Pillow Lab: Monique Martin and Minty Fresh Circus](#)
- [What Is Afrofuturism? \(Smithsonian Magazine\)](#)
- [Why Rest is an Act of Resistance \(NPR’s Life Kit\)](#)
- [Harriet Tubman \(History.com\)](#)
- [Martin Luther King, Jr. – I’m Black and Beautiful](#)
- [Hip Hop: A Culture of Vision and Voice \(The Kennedy Center\)](#)
- [The Black Circus and the Multiplicity of Gazes](#)
- [Five on the Black Hand Side: Origins and Evolutions of the Dap](#)