

Stomp

Flynn Student Matinee Series Study Guide



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About the Artists

"Stomp finds beauty and music in the mundane. It turns brooms into instruments and handclapping into a conversation; the junk and clutter of urban life becomes the source of infectious rhythm and wonder."

-Stomp's [website](#)

Stomp is a physical theatrical show which uses ordinary objects and performers' bodies to create a percussion-focused performance full of rhythms, acrobatics, and pantomime (acting things out without using words).



Creators of Stomp, Luke Cresswell (left) and Steve McNicholas (right)

The show premiered in New York City in 1994, and has been performing across the world since then. It was created by British artists Luke Cresswell and Steve McNicholas, who began collaborating in the early 1980s. They were in a punk band together, which eventually broke up, but not before Cresswell, the percussionist, realized how much audiences loved it when he would use unconventional objects in his percussion. The band often performed outside on the street, which meant he couldn't carry around a full drum kit and had to

improvise with found objects. This was the seed that led to the formation of the show *Stomp*. The first iteration of the show had eight ensemble members and in 1991 it debuted at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, a globally renowned festival showcasing new theater performances.

After touring the show internationally for three years, Cresswell and McNicholas brought *Stomp* to New York City's Orpheum Theater, where it played for more than 11,000 performances from 1994-2023. The show became an enormous critical success and has received many awards including an Obie, an Emmy (for the HBO special [Stomp Out Loud](#)), an Olivier, and the Innovator Award from the American Choreography Association.



An image from the first, 30-minute version of Stomp in 1990

Stomp has performed at the Oscars, the Emmys, and the closing ceremony of the [2012 London Olympics](#), as well as appearances on TV including Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, Sesame Street, [an anti-littering public service commercial](#), Late Night with Jimmy Fallon, and much more.

Over the years, the show has had many celebrity collaborators, including actor Bette Midler, clown Bill Irwin, musician Paul Simon, and more. Check out a complete timeline of Stomp's history [here](#)!



Stomp performing at the 2012 Olympics

What Makes Stomp Unique?

“It’s constructed almost like a symphony, in that it’s a musical journey... it opens your ears. You’ll listen to the world, and your world, in a different way after you’ve seen the show.”

-Co-creator Steve McNicholas

“Stomp” is a unique theatrical experience that has found success touring all over the world. What exactly are some of the ingredients that make this show resonate with so many audiences? And how was it created?



An image from Stomp

When the creators first began shaping the show, they were influenced by workers’ rights and labor union movements of the 1980s in the UK. Over the years, they have been asked if there was a political statement behind the choice of using recycled objects in the show, and the creators have said no. “But really the very act of making music from found objects is in itself an act of defiance in the face of materialism,” says co-creator Steve McNicholas in an [interview](#). “If we can make music with anything, so can everyone else.” The show

reminds audiences that you don’t need a cello or a drum kit to make music – music is all around us.

An element of Stomp the creators discuss is the concept of “visual rhythm.” This means that the sound and the movement are always intertwined. It’s not exactly a dance piece, and not exactly a music piece – instead, it’s a piece in which the rhythm is being created in our ears and our eyes at the exact same time.

And even though there isn’t any spoken dialogue in the show, all eight characters you’ll see have distinct personalities with their own arcs throughout the show. They even have names, despite the fact that you won’t hear those names spoken! There’s Mozzie, a character who is “like the mosquito bugging everyone on stage,” according to [cast member Jayme Overton](#). Another character is Sarge, who is essentially the conductor of the show, with the other characters following their lead.

While there is no spoken dialogue, there is a lot of physical comedy throughout the show. Taking inspiration from mime traditions, silent movies, and old Hollywood musicals in which dance and

physical comedy often went hand in hand, Stomp doesn't take itself too seriously. Through the wordless clash of characters, the show reveals comedy through body language, often presented as lighthearted rivalry between people.

The two directors of the show had the final say and the unifying vision in creating the show, while at the same time making space for the performers to bring in their own ideas and unique perspectives. Each performer creates their own solo moments and designs their own costumes. This has also meant that the look of the show has evolved over the thirty years it's been onstage. Every few years, the show replaces routines and tries out new objects to use as instruments. Despite the show being highly choreographed, there are spaces for improvisation in the performers' solos and in the moments of physical comedy, making it so that no two shows are ever exactly the same.

As co-creator Steve McNicholas puts it in [an interview](#), “we discovered that as soon as we removed dialogue, we removed melody from most of the show, that it had something that was universal that everybody understood. It didn't matter where you came from, or how old you were, what kind of music you listened to. It seemed to work for everyone. We took the show to Brazil, to Japan, to Russia, and the rhythm, the humor, the interaction of the characters onstage, it works everywhere. We always used to say rhythm is a universal language.”



Water jugs and shopping carts create music in Stomp

There's an element of audience interaction that makes this show special, too! While your feet might be tapping along to the rhythm throughout, there are also particular moments when the audience is invited to join in and help create the rhythm through call-and-response. So get ready for some hand clapping and finger snapping along with the cast!

Sound & Percussion

“People drum their fingers on table tops when they are waiting for something to happen. They tap their feet when they are bored. They walk in rhythm quite naturally when they walk down the street... and jangle keys in their pocket... Yes, everything has a rhythm to it. Everything has music to it!”

-Luke Cresswell and Steve McNicholas

Sound is the combination of three things: a **vibrating source** to create sound waves; a **medium** (including air!) for the sound waves to move through; and a **receiver** to hear them (like your ears!). One way to visualize how sound works is to think of water. If you throw a pebble into water, the water starts to ripple, beginning where the pebble met the water and moving outwards. Depending on the size of the pebble, the ripples will be bigger or smaller.

Sound has three basic properties: pitch, intensity, and quality. **Pitch** means the rate at which the vibrations are produced. The higher the frequency of vibrations, the higher the pitch. **Intensity** changes based on the strength of the vibrations creating the sound – in other words, the amount of force used to strike or rattle the object creating the vibration. **Quality** of a sound means whether our brains interpret a sound as pleasant or unpleasant, based on how it meets our ears. To learn more about the science of sound, [check out this resource!](#)

Stomp is all about **percussion** – sounds produced by striking an object. There are many ways to engage with an object to create different kinds of percussion. A drum makes sound when you strike it with your hand or a drumstick. A rattle, like a maraca used in jazz, Latin, and swing music, is made from a dried gourd containing seeds or beads, which make sound as you shake the gourd. You can try making your own version of a drum or a rattle! For a drum, you’ll need a hollow object, like a jar or a box, and something with which you can tightly cover the opening, such as cloth or plastic film. For a rattle, try taping together two yogurt containers with dried beans inside and then



What kind of sound do you think these trash can lids make?

start shaking it. How many different rhythms can you create? Traditional percussion instruments include the drum, cymbal, or xylophone. But Stomp utilizes everyday objects to create its percussive musical score. These include matchboxes, tin cans, brooms, trash cans, combs, plastic bags, suitcases, water jugs, lighters, and so much more!

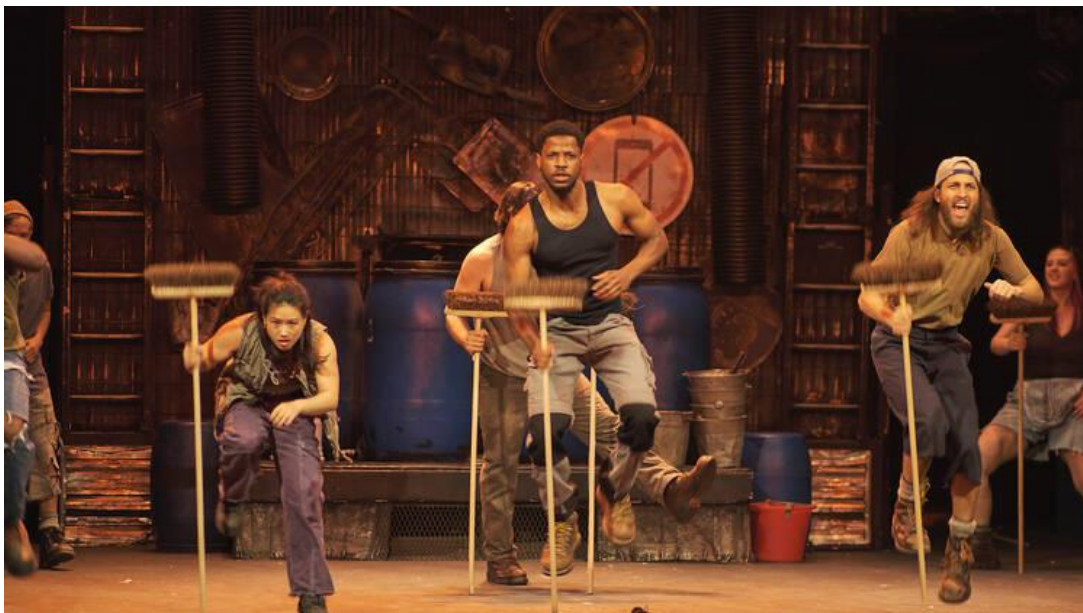
Despite these items being ones that can be found in most places in the world, the creators of the show discovered that depending on where they were made, they often sound different. The creators of the show have had to make sure to use items made in the same place, in order to achieve a consistent sound, so they ship the props from Britain by boat.

Over the years, Stomp has experimented with many sound making objects that didn't make it into the show. You can make music out of anything, but when building a show, the creators wanted to make sure there was some kind of reason to use each object. Sometimes an object made an interesting sound, but it didn't make the cut because it didn't fit the context of the rest of the show.



The set itself, which looks like a junkyard, acts as both instrument and visual backdrop for the show. And it's not all loud sounds and clanging – some moments are quiet and intimate, others

are more intense. The many different objects used as instruments create a wide range of sound, making the show dynamic and gentle on the ears. The cast [promises](#) that you won't get a headache from watching this show!



An image from the iconic opening scene of Stomp

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?
- What everyday objects can you imagine being used to create percussion?
- What does the word “stomp” make you think of?
- Try to pay attention to the normal sounds you hear as you move through your day. How many sounds can you name?

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?
- What did you think was the most surprising everyday object used in the show? Can you imagine any additional ways to use that object as an instrument?
- How did this show make you think differently about sound?

Resources

- [Stomp Out Loud \(45 minute documentary\)](#)
- [‘Stomp’ Turns 25. Here Are 10 Things You Didn’t Know About It \(NY Times\)](#)
- [Stomp Timeline](#)
- [Stomp Interview](#)
- [Behind the Scenes with Joshua Cruz from Stomp](#)
- [What is Sound? A Comprehensive Exploration for Kids Aged 5-12](#)