

Zephyr: A Whirlwind of Circus
by Cirque Mechanics

Flynn Student Matinee Study Guide



Table of Contents:

About Cirque Mechanics
About the Show
Inspiration: Wind, Contraptions, & Humor
Origins of Contemporary Circus
Reflection Questions
Resources

FLYNN

About Cirque Mechanics

Inspired by contemporary circus, Cirque Mechanics creates shows that incorporate original contraptions, storytelling, and high-level acrobatics, showcasing the relationships between the acrobatic and mechanical worlds.



The Cirque Mechanics team hanging out on one of their contraptions

The founders, Chris Lashua and Aloysia Gavre, met in 1999 while they were both working at Cirque du Soleil, and began experimenting with ways to use machinery to create acrobatics they had never seen before. In 2004 they joined with other collaborators to create their first show, *Birdhouse Factory*. This show toured for ten years, visiting over 10 countries on 5 continents. The New York Times called it “exceptional, evocative... and engrossingly entertaining.” This led the artists to continue inventing new devices that would become the heart of their touring theatrical shows. Since then, they have created five touring shows, including *Zephyr*, which you’ll be seeing at The Flynn!

To build their shows, they begin by thinking about a machine they want to build and engage with that they’ve never seen used in circus before. From there, they figure

out a story based on that device. You can hear one of the Cirque Mechanics founders, Chris Lashua, talk about the evolution of some of their contraptions [in this interview!](#)

About the Show

Cirque Mechanics has designed and built a performance windmill to serve as the multi-functional mechanical centerpiece of their story. Mounted on a turntable, the windmill combines both modern and older more picturesque elements. This turntable transforms the scenes and creates unexpected flight for the performers.

In the show, we’ll follow the story of Nigel, the owner and operator of the windmill. Nigel has a complicated relationship with wind, the natural resource that powers his flour mill. His actions cause joy and chaos, and he grapples with tough choices and unintended outcomes with humor and optimism. The show leaves audiences with ideas of acceptance, coexistence, and balance with the power of the wind, and ultimately, it will leave you thinking about progress within your communities and for our shared world.

Inspiration: Wind, Contraptions, and Humor

“Zephyr: A Whirlwind of Circus” was inspired by a trip to the [Whissendine Windmill](#), a working grist mill in England, where the Cirque Mechanics company members met the owner (also named Nigel!) and got a tour inside of the windmill. They were inspired by the sound of the windmill’s sails, the movement of the gears and mechanisms that made the windmill work, and the action of the windmill operator, running around adjusting levers and ensuring everything was running properly.

But wait! What even is a windmill?

A windmill is a structure that converts wind power into energy. In the earliest windmills, wind would spin the vanes, or blades of the windmill, rotating a center shaft, which then spun a grain mill, usually made of large, flat stones, to produce flour. Modern wind power machines are used to create electricity, and are called wind turbines (but you can also still call them windmills!).



In the show, you'll see a windmill onstage!

Humans have been harnessing the energy power of wind for thousands of years, starting in around 5,000 BCE when people used wind to propel boats along the Nile River. The first known windmills were from Sistan, a region in Iran and Afghanistan, and there’s debate about when exactly they were invented, but by the year 800 CE people were using them regularly.

During the Industrial Revolution, which began in the late 1700s, humans’ ability to harness power took off in ways that would forever change the world. With inventions like the cotton mill, the steamboat, the telegraph, and the sewing machine, production of goods moved out of people’s homes and into factories, allowing us to produce materials on a scale never before seen in human history.

Because of the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution, the use of wind power declined in the 1800s... but windmills never became entirely obsolete. For example, water pumps powered by wind are very self-sufficient, requiring only a small amount of wind to pull water from deep wells. And when oil prices began to rise in the 1970s, wind turbines to create electricity became more attractive, because wind energy is a clean and renewable resource, and can be an alternative to fossil fuels.

Fun fact – a single wind turbine can produce enough electricity to power around 600 homes!

But wait! Why is the show called “Zephyr”? The word “Zephyr” comes from Greek, meaning a soft, gentle breeze. In Greek mythology, Zephyrus was one of four wind gods, and he was god of the west wind and the messenger of spring.

In the show you might also see whirligigs! Whirligigs are whimsical, colorful objects that move or spin, like a pinwheel, weathervane, or spinning toy.



Marcel Marceau as Bip the Clown

But wait! What makes the show funny? Some of the humor in the show is inspired by the novel *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, written by the Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. It’s one of the earliest written novels in a modern European language, and was published in two parts, in 1605 and 1615. The story is about a rich middle-aged man who, after reading many tales about knights, suddenly believes that he is a knight named Don Quixote. He rides around having adventures, but everyone laughs at the things he does. One of the most famous stories in the novel is about his fight with windmills. He mistakes them for giants sent by evil enchanters and attempts to fight them, but keeps failing (because you can’t really fight a windmill, can you?).

In the show, you’ll also see miming – this is a style of performance in which a performer interacts with imaginary objects. One of the most famous mimes was a French actor known as Marcel Marceau, who created his famous stage

persona Bip the Clown in 1947, and went on to perform across the globe for over 60 years. He described mime as “the art of silence.” This is because mimes don’t speak – their performances are entirely done without spoken language!

Origins of Contemporary 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. And circus stayed relatively the same for about two hundred years.

But since the 1970s, many companies have moved away from these traditional ideas of circus, experimenting with the ingredients of circus, and developing many different styles, all of which fall under the general umbrella of contemporary circus.

Contemporary circus is a genre of performing arts in which a story or theme is conveyed through circus skills, such as acrobatics, juggling, physical comedy, clowning, trapeze, and more. Many contemporary circus companies explore complex stories, social commentary, and politics in their performances.

As the circus educator [Shana Kennedy says in a Ted Talk](#), “unlike classical circus, which puts entertainment and spectacle first, contemporary circus is more interested in creating meaning. It presents a vision that is personal to each artist, and it develops this idea... the artists have relationships onstage and the very notion of an ‘act’ tends to disappear.”



A performance by contemporary circus troupe Compagnie XY

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 about circus, what comes to mind?
- How do you imagine this show might incorporate a windmill onstage? What are some ways you imagine performers might interact with this mechanism?

After the Show:

- How did the show meet or break your expectations of circus?
- What mechanisms did you notice in the show? How do you think some of them worked?
- 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?
- In theatre, symbolism is the use of one or more objects to represent something else. The object may represent an idea, a feeling, or a physical entity. Symbols allow theater

makers to convey messages to audiences that would be difficult to communicate through dialogue or action alone. Did you see any symbolism in the show?

- 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?

Resources

- Cirque Mechanics Company Website
<https://cirquemechanics.com/about/>
- Interview with Cirque Mechanics founder, Chris Lashua
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSr9jWQhw9Q&t=26s>
- Trailer for “Zephyr: A Whirlwind of Circus”
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mz5nNb_kM8o
- Shana Kennedy’s TedX talk “What is Contemporary Circus?”
https://www.ted.com/talks/shana_kennedy_what_is_contemporary_circus
- About the Whissendine Windmill, the inspiration for the show
<https://www.whissendine.net/whissendine-windmill/>