

The Arts in Every Classroom: A Workshop for Elementary School Teachers
Reading

Parade

In May 1917, a collaboration among famous artists from various disciplines resulted in a unique ballet entitled *Parade*. The scenario was written by Jean Cocteau, the music was created by Erik Satie, costumes were designed by Pablo Picasso, and the choreography was created by Léonide Massine.

“Parade,” according to a French dictionary, is a “comic act, put on at the entrance of a traveling theatre to attract a crowd.” Therefore, the play is based on the idea of a traveling theatre troupe whose “Parade” is mistaken by the crowd for the real circus act. The managers and performers try to get the crowd to enter the circus tent, but no one enters.

Characters in the work include a Chinese magician, a little American girl, acrobats, three managers, and a horse.

Audiences of 1917 hated *Parade*, but it is remembered today as one of the first surrealist productions. After studying *Parade*, you will notice many similarities to *Quidam*, which many call a contemporary surrealist performance.

Parade followed this simple story line, written by Cocteau:

The set represents a street in front of several houses in Paris on a Sunday. A traveling theatre troupe, the Théâtre Forain, is present on the street performing three music hall acts — the Chinese Magician, Acrobats, and the Little American Dancing Girl. Together, the acts are called a Parade. Three managers of the theatre troupe organize the publicity. They communicate in their extraordinary language that the crowd should join the Parade to see the show inside and grossly try to make the crowd understand this. No one enters. After the last act of the Parade, the exhausted managers collapse on each other. Seeing the supreme effort and the failure of the managers, the Chinese Magician, the Acrobats, and the Little American Girl try to explain to the crowd that the show takes place inside.

What was unique about this piece was the artists’ nonrealistic approach to performance. A 1917 description of the performance may help.

Picasso painted a drop curtain — a Cubist depiction of a cityscape with a miniature theater at its center. The action itself began with the First Manager dressed in Picasso’s 10-foot-high Cubist costume dancing to a simple repeated rhythmic theme. The American manager was dressed as a skyscraper and his movements were very accented and strict. The Third Manager performed in silence on horseback and introduced the next act, two acrobats who tumbled to the music of a fast waltz played by xylophones. The ballet ended with the Little American Girl in tears as the crowds refused to enter the circus tent.