

STUDY GUIDE



CIRCUS & VARIETY

About the Colorful Hat

The Colorful Hat Circus & Variety was created in 2007 by Producer Thomas Seaton. Based in Chattanooga, Tennessee, Thomas brings world-class circus and variety performers together from around the country to carry on the tradition of classic vaudeville performances.

The Colorful Hat itself is a nod to the vintage vaudeville performers of the past, who were often seen wearing comical, colorful hats that often had a way of showing up in their routines!

As you arrive, you will notice the Colorful Hat sitting on a hat rack on stage, alongside a vintage costume trunk waiting to be unpacked. Just like any great traveling vaudeville show, our performance begins with the magic of setting up the stage.

The Acts: Circus Skills on Stage

Every skill you will see in The Colorful Hat Circus & Variety takes years of practice, focus, and determination. Here is a look at each act, and some you can even try yourself!

Juggling

Juggling is the art of keeping multiple objects in the air at the same time by tossing and catching them in a continuous pattern. Jugglers can use balls, rings, clubs, scarves, and even unusual objects like fruit! Juggling requires hand-eye coordination, focus, and rhythm.

Try it! Start with one ball, then try two. Juggling three is a big achievement, most people need weeks of practice! Beanbags or tennis balls are a great place to start.

Jump Rope

Jump rope is one of the oldest physical activities in the world, and one of the most competitive! Our acrobats got their start in the world of competitive jump rope, training for years and traveling the globe to compete in international championships. Skills like speed jumping, gymnastics-style tricks, and synchronized Double Dutch (two ropes turning at once) are all judged events, just like gymnastics or figure skating.

Did You Know? Competitive jump rope has its own world governing body and official international competitions, with athletes representing their countries from all around the globe, just like the Olympics!

Try it! Jump rope builds cardiovascular fitness, timing, agility, and coordination.

Magic & Illusion

A magician creates the feeling that something impossible has happened, like making objects appear, disappear, float or transform right before your eyes!

Have you ever heard of Harry Houdini? He was one of the greatest magicians who ever lived, and he got his start performing in vaudeville shows just like this one, amazing audiences night after night with escapes and illusions that seemed truly impossible!

The magician in our show has performed on The Tonight Show and at the Magic Circle in London, England. One of the acts you will see is his own unique version of one of Harry Houdini's most famous and fastest illusions!

Try it! Many magic tricks can be performed with common objects like playing cards, coins, and paper napkins. Ask a librarian for a beginner's magic book!

Hula Hoops

Hula hoop performers keep hoops spinning around their body using rhythmic movement of their hips, waist, arms, and neck. Advanced performers can keep many hoops spinning at once, toss them in the air, and even jump through them!

Try it! Hula hoops are a fantastic way to build core strength, balance, and coordination, which is why they are a staple of physical education classes!

Acrobatics & Tumbling

Acrobatics is the performance of extraordinary feats of balance, agility, and motor coordination. Tumbling, including flips, rolls, cartwheels, and handsprings, is one of the oldest forms of physical performance in the world, dating back to ancient China, Egypt, and Greece.

Gymnastics, cheerleading, martial arts, and dance all share the same foundations as circus acrobatics.

Teeterboard Acrobats and the Grand Finale!

The Teeterboard is a giant see-saw that acrobats use to launch each other high into the air, performing flips and tricks above the stage. It is one of the most spectacular acts in all of circus performance!

The Teeterboard closes our show, and as a special treat, watch as the performers combine props from throughout the entire performance, including hula hoops and jump ropes, into one spectacular finale!

Fun fact: The harder the launch performer jumps on their end of the board, the higher the flyer goes. Newton's Third Law in action!

A History of Circus & Variety in America

Vaudeville: The Original Variety Show

Long before television, movies, or the internet, people found entertainment by going to the theatre! Vaudeville was a type of variety show that became wildly popular across the United States starting in the early 1870s and lasting all the way through the 1930s.

A vaudeville show was like a greatest hits collection of live performance, a single evening might feature magicians, jugglers, acrobats, comedians, singers, dancers, and more, all one after another on the same stage. Audiences never knew exactly what was coming next, and that was a big part of the fun!

Some of the most famous entertainers in American history, including Judy Garland, Bob Hope, and Buster Keaton, got their very first start performing on the vaudeville stage, perfecting their acts night after night. When movies and radio arrived in the late 1920s, audiences began staying home, and the great vaudeville era slowly came to a close, but the love of live variety performance never went away.

Vaudeville theaters were built all across America and many are still in use as historic theaters and performing arts centers.

The American Circus

The American circus has just as exciting a story! The very first circus performances in the United States took place as far back as 1793 in New York City and Philadelphia. By the 1800s, traveling circuses had become one of the most thrilling events in American life.

Imagine living in a small town and one day a giant circus rolls in — with acrobats, clowns, and performers who could do things you had never seen before! Showmen P.T. Barnum and James A. Bailey became legends by creating a circus that traveled all across the country under the famous Big Top tent, bringing jaw-dropping acts to audiences everywhere. For generations of American kids, the arrival of the circus was the most magical day of the year.

The Colorful Hat Carries It Forward

Today, The Colorful Hat Circus & Variety is carrying that long and joyful tradition into the present and performing it on exactly the kind of stage where it has always belonged.

Just like a vaudeville show, our performance moves quickly from one amazing act to the next, keeping you on the edge of your seat the whole time. And just like the great American circus, every skill you will see on stage has been practiced for years by performers who have dedicated their lives to performing their art.

Juggling, acrobatics, balancing, magic, and more, all happening right in front of you. The circus and vaudeville were always about the same thing, bringing people together to share a moment of pure wonder.

The Science of the Circus!

Did you know that circus performers are scientists? It's true! Every trick you see on stage uses real science. Let's take a look!

Physics	Biology	Math
Forces, gravity, and spinning power are at work in every act.	Your muscles, brain, and balance system all work together to make these skills possible.	Timing, rhythm, and patterns are the hidden math behind juggling, jump rope, and more.

Juggling - Gravity!

When a juggler throws a ball into the air, something always brings it back down. That force is called gravity. Gravity pulls everything toward the ground — all the time! A juggler's job is to throw the next ball at just the right moment, before gravity wins. It takes a LOT of practice!

Hula Hoops - Spinning Power!

Have you ever noticed that a spinning top stays up, but a still top falls over? A hula hoop works the same way. When it spins fast, it stays up. When it slows down, it falls. The performer keeps it spinning with their body — the faster the spin, the better!

Jump Rope - Waves!

When a jump rope swings through the air, it makes a shape like a wave — just like water at the beach! The performer has to jump in just the right spot at just the right time. Miss the timing, and the rope catches you!

Acrobatics - Push & Go!

When an acrobat pushes hard off the ground, they fly into the air. The harder they push, the higher they go! A scientist named Isaac Newton figured this out hundreds of years ago; he called it one of his Laws of Motion. Acrobats use it every single jump!

Chair Stacking and Balancing - Center of Gravity!

Every object has a special point where its weight is perfectly balanced, called the center of gravity. When a performer balances on a tall stack of chairs, they work hard to keep their center of gravity right over the bottom chair.

Teeterboard — Push & Fly!

The teeterboard is like a giant see-saw. When one performer jumps down on one end, the other flies into the air! The harder the push, the higher the flight. That is Newton's Law again; every push creates a reaction in the opposite direction!

The Big Idea!

Circus performers train their bodies to understand science without even thinking about it. The next time you see a juggler keep five balls in the air, remember they are using gravity, timing, and math all at the same time!

Science Discussion Questions

- When a juggler drops a ball, what force caused it to fall? How could they change their throw to keep it up longer?
- If a hula hoop spins slowly, it falls quickly. Why does spinning faster help keep it up?
- Can you think of other everyday activities that use the same science as circus skills? (Think: sports, playgrounds, riding a bike!)

Classroom Activities

Design Your Colorful Hat

Draw and decorate your own Colorful Hat with your choice of colors, patterns, and decorations.

Create a Vaudeville Timeline

Create a class timeline of circus and vaudeville history from ancient Greece through P.T. Barnum, the golden age of vaudeville, and right up to today!

Try a Circus Skill!

Practice a circus skill using safe equipment like scarves for juggling, hula hoops, or jump ropes. Once you learn a trick or 2, team up with some friends and put together your skills to create a circus performance of your own!

Suggested Reading

Pre-K and Kindergarten

If I Ran the Circus by Dr. Seuss

Harold's Circus by Crockett Johnson

Circus by Lois Ehlert

Peter Spier's Circus by Peter Spier

Grades 1-3

The Man Who Walked Between the Towers by Mordicai Gerstein

The Circus Ship by Chris Van Dusen

Sidewalk Circus by Paul Fleischman & Kevin Hawkes

A Picture Book of Harry Houdini by David A. Adler

Houdini's Library by Barb Rosenstock

Grades 3-5

Who Was P.T. Barnum? by Kirsten Anderson

The Great and Only Barnum by Candace Fleming

Harry Houdini for Kids by Laurie Carlson

DIY Circus Lab for Kids by Hitchcock & Gombash