

THE RUSSIAN AMERICAN KIDS CIRCUS

**TEACHER'S
STUDY GUIDE**

The Russian American Kids Circus

In Russia, circus performers are as revered as Olympic athletes, training for the Big Top starts at an early age. As a young man our founder, Alex Berenchtein, was a star acrobat and juggler in the Moscow Circus. In 1990, he came to the U.S with a dream: create a circus school and performing troupe for American kids, based on Russian circus traditions and filled with energy and optimism. With his wife, Regina, and her mother, Olga Partigul, he opened a not-for-profit academy, the New Way Circus Center, Inc., in 1994. There, kids learn not only circus arts but the joys of athleticism, creativity and self-discipline.

The Russian American Kids Circus is a professional circus whose performers just happen to be kids. Here's a partial list of their astonishing acts:

**Flying acrobatics
Tightrope walking
Juggling
Unicycle
Countless hoops
Spanish web
Swinging luna ring
Rolling globes
Spinning plates
and, of course,
Clowning!**

The Russian American Kids Circus is a breathtaking spectacle performed entirely by boys and girls aged 6 to 16. These accomplished young performers have been trained in the heart of Brooklyn, New York, by veterans of the famous Moscow Circus.

Filling the air with a blur of spangles, the Russian American Kids Circus will dazzle you with exciting acts - blending Old World artistry with state-of-the-art techniques and equipment.

The Russian American Circus is made up of performers age 6 – 16 that have studied at the New Way Circus Center in New York City. These students come there to learn different circus skills, but they also learn directly or indirectly many “life skills and lessons.” The directors of the company try to instill the students with a sense of well being, self-confidence and positive self-esteem through their teaching techniques and performance style.

It is very critical that students seeing the Russian American Kids Circus understand that the performers are very much everyday kids, just like them. Each performance by these kids proclaims the message that it is only individual hard work, courage, discipline, teamwork, dedicated effort, and a sense of joy that makes the impossible, possible and the highest standards of excellence and professionalism a reality.

CLASS DISCUSSION:

Why are circus performers held in such high esteem in Russia?

Like the Russian Ballet Companies, The Russian Orchestras and other arts, the circus is considered to be a “national cultural treasure” which is supported by the Russian government. Not only is there a national circus, there are also many regional circuses. The circus has had a long and rich history in Russia and many of the acts reflect that history. Many of the top circus performers in the world have come from Russia. Russian performers have been considered national representatives around the world. The circus is owned and run by the government, which also operates many training schools. Children are sought out for their special talents and trained in these schools with full financial support. The circus is considered an art form to be respected and honored. Unlike other parts of the world where circus workers and performers are considered low class or not to be trusted, the circus performer in Russia is considered to be an artist with special talent, looked up to and respected as a member of society.

(See the attached page on The New Way Circus Center for more information on their goals and philosophy.)

Why have many Russian performers and athletes immigrated to the United States?

Points to consider:

Artistic Freedom: because the state owns and runs the circus, many performers did not feel that they had the opportunity to grow as artists and explore new approaches to their performances. The Russian Circus did not change much over a long period of time.

Political Restrictions: if performers disagreed with the political system they were often removed from the circus and did not have as great an opportunity to work.

Religious Restrictions: the Russian government did not recognize religions and religious beliefs, so many performers would leave the country so they could practice their faith.

Financial Considerations: while the performers were supported by the government, they did not have the opportunities to improve their financial worth or earn the money that many of the performers in the free world were making.

Declining Support: after the breakup of the U.S.S.R. the government was less able to support the circus and the circus performers.

Why do circus performers normally start training at a very young age?

The skills used by a circus performer require the physical and mental development that comes with many years of practice. By beginning to train at an early age performers can be better developed physically for to handle the demands of the work, can learn more skills and grow into the work. Many performers come from a family of performers and grow up in the circus so their training is simply a part of growing up.

Have the class discuss the following character traits and how studying an activity like circus techniques can assist a person in developing a positive approach to life.

**Discipline
Creativity
Focus
Concentration
Physical control
Observation
Sensitivity
Team work
Self-awareness
Self-esteem
Coordination
Hard work**

CLASS ACTIVITY

Under careful supervision, have your students try to develop elementary circus skills – juggling, tumbling, cycling, stilt walking. Have them work together to create a routine.

Circus performers, just like many other performers have many superstitions. Here are just a few.

- **Never look back during a parade. (Some shows fined clowns who did.)**
- **Never sit on the ring curb facing out.**
- **Never whistle in the dressing room.**
- **Peacock feathers are bad luck.**
- **Accidents happen in threes.**
- **Elephants must always have their trunks up in pictures.**
- **Hair from the tail of an elephant is good luck. (Often made into rings or bracelets)**

CLOWNS

There are many different types of clowns. Their history stretches back to ancient Greece and Rome. Many people think of clowns as the central figure in the circus. Have your students research different types of clowns – White face, European, hobo, Commedia de Arte, traditional, etc.

Each clowns makeup is unique and individual. Modern clowns must register their makeup design, similar to a copyright. Have your students create or design their own clown makeup.

STUDENT PROJECT:

There are many different types of Circuses. Have the students research the different styles of circus and what makes them different. Just a few types that can be considered are: The Russian Circus, The American Circus, The European Circus and the new circus characterized by “Cirque Du Soleil” and other Canadian companies.

RUSSIA

Formerly **The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics**

The dictionary provides three definitions for Russia which reflect its varied history.

1. A former empire of eastern Europe and northern Asia. Originally settled by Slavs from the 3rd to 8th century, the region was long a conglomerate of independent principalities until Moscow gained ascendancy in the 14th – 16th centuries. The empire achieved the height of its power under Peter the Great and Catherine the Great in the 17th and 18th centuries. The early 1800's were a period of reactionism, and although some liberal reforms were effected in the late 1800's, discontent remained and led directly to the Revolutions of 1905 and 1917, an internal power struggle, and the formation of the U.S.S.R. in 1922.
2. A republic of eastern Europe and northern Asia bordering in the west on Finland, the Baltic States, Belarus, and the Ukraine and stretching eastward to the Pacific Ocean. The Russian Soviet Federated Republic, coextensive with the region, was proclaimed in 1917 after the Russian Revolution. It became part of the U.S.S.R. in 1922, and reemerged as an independent republic after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Moscow is the capital and the largest city.
3. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. (U.S.S.R.)

CLASS PROJECTS:

Have your students find the country of Russia on the map. They will find that the country is bordered by several oceans and seas. What is the difference between an ocean and a sea? How many oceans border on Russia? (2) Which ones? (Arctic and Pacific) How many seas surround Russia? (10) Which ones? (Barents, Kara, Laptev, East Siberian, Chukchi, Bering, Okhotsk, Japan, Caspian, Aral)

Have your students study the political history of Russia. Discuss how the different political structures may have effected life in Russia. Did the political environment in Russia cause people to immigrate out of the country and why?