

Benjamin West, Painter of “His Story”



A Shadow Puppet Play

Written by Helen Abernathy

Based on the biography, Benjamin West and His Cat Grimalkin

Description of Shadow Puppetry

Shadow play or shadow puppetry is an ancient form of storytelling still used in many cultures today. It uses puppets cut from card stock that are moved between a light source and a screen. The audience sits on the opposite side of the screen from the puppeteers and sees only the shadows of the puppets. The story is narrated, and for younger puppeteers, there are readers who read the lines for the puppets, as well.

We have adapted the shadow puppet format to make it easier for young children. A large screen or a light-colored wall is needed upon which to project the play. A light is cast onto the wall. The puppeteers operate the puppets on long dowels from underneath a long table that is covered to the floor on three sides. Children kneel below the table and manipulate the puppets to act out the story. All the readers stand in front of the curtain off to the right and left sides.

Characters

Readers:

Benjamin West
Papa West
Mamma West
Uncle Phineas
Indian Chief Sassoonan
5 Narrators (or however many are needed for your class size)
All readers should be dressed in their colonial costumes.

Puppeteers:

Benjamin West
Grimalkin
Papa West
Mamma West
Uncle Phineas
Indian Chief Sassoonan
Bear
Elk
Beaver

Scenery

Door-Latch Inn and Penn’s Forest

Scenery is cut from black card stock using the patterns provided on the Resource CD. It may be necessary to enlarge the patterns to accommodate your puppet and “stage” size. The scenery is taped to the wall behind where the play is staged. Create two settings, Door-Latch Inn on stage right and Penn’s Forest on stage left.

Introduction

Lights are turned on.

ALL: Have all the children arranged in front of the stage to sing “All Things Bright and Beautiful.” Depart for their part in the puppet play.

Narrator 1: Welcome to our puppet show about a young boy named Benjamin West and his pet black cat, Grimalkin. They lived in Pennsylvania when it was still a colony and the local American Indians were saying, “Itah!” or “Good be to you!”

Narrator 2: Benjamin was the youngest of ten children from a humble, Quaker family. His grandfather had come from England with William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania. There was Papa West.

[Papa West puppet appears on the puppet stage.]

Narrator 3: There was Mamma West.

[Mamma West puppet appears on the puppet stage.]

And young Benjamin West, a small boy for whom God had **BIG** plans.

[Benjamin puppet appears on the stage.]

Narrator 4: Benjamin had a dream. And it was not the normal dream for a Quaker boy. He dreamed of becoming a painter. This may not sound so strange today, but if you were a Quaker in the 1700s, it was an impossible dream.

Narrator 5: You see, Quakers were a people who lived a simple and frugal way of life. They believed that drawing images and painting pictures was frivolous. But God had created Benjamin with a very special talent to be invested in “His Story!” ***[Narrator points toward heaven.]***

Narrator 1: Young Benjamin had never seen a picture . . . that is, not until he was six years old and sketched one himself with the help of his best friend, Grimalkin the cat.

[Grimalkin puppet appears.]

Scene One Door-Latch Inn

Puppeteers are located under the Door-Latch Inn scenery on the wall.

Benjamin & ***[Benjamin talking to Grimalkin]***

Grimalkin: Someday I shall do a fine portrait of thee, Grimalkin. Someday, when I have green color to match thy eyes . . . Someday when I have time!

Papa: ***[Papa marches over to Benjamin. Make sure his finger is pointing at Benjamin.]***

Narrator 2: You see, Papa West was always giving Benjamin chores to do. He wanted to keep him busy so that Benjamin wouldn’t have time to draw or paint.

[Exit Papa puppet.]

Narrator 3: One day, Benjamin didn’t have school because the schoolmaster was away on business. Finally, he had time to draw!

Benjamin: *[Benjamin and Grimalkin walk to Mamma who is by the kitchen fire.]*
Mamma, please may Grimalkin and I go off into the forest?

Mamma: With thy drawing boards?

Benjamin: Yes, Mamma.

Mamma: Papa said that thee may continue with thy drawing, if it does not interfere with thy chores. Yes, son, thee may go.

Benjamin: *[Leaps in the air for joy, then pauses and says sadly]* But what if Papa finds me in the woods and thinks up a chore?

Mamma: I have already thought of a chore. It is a fine day to go a-leafing. I need a good supply of oak leaves to line the oven floor when I bake my bread. I need a whole winter's supply.

Benjamin: *[Excitedly]* That will take no time at all. I will have plenty of time to sketch! Thank you, Mamma! Come on, Grimalkin, let's go!

Narrator 4: *[Use walking Benjamin puppet and walking Grimalkin puppet]*
Benjamin filled his pockets with charcoal, took a small, rough drawing board, and skipped out the door.

Narrator 5: His world was every shade of red and gold with autumn. Benjamin took a deep breath, as if to inhale his freedom in one gulp. He waved good-bye to the Inn.

Benjamin: *[Very happily in a sing-song voice]* Do not expect us home until late!

Narrator 1: Benjamin skipped quickly down the road. He parted the bushes and found a narrow Indian trail. And just that quickly he and Grimalkin were in Penn's Forest.

Lights go out to change settings.

Scene Two Penn's Forest

Puppeteers move to the Penn's Forest scenery.

Lights are turned on.

Leaves flutter slowly down.

Narrator 2: Upon entering the forest, Benjamin stopped to listen for the stillness of the woods. But it wasn't still at all. A hazelnut dropped with a thud at his feet. Bird wings whistled through the trees. And in the distance there was the crackling sound of fire.
[Optional: Create and use a puppet of a hazelnut and a bird.]

Benjamin: *[Excitedly]* The Indians! They must be firing the forest to kill off the brush. Make haste, Grimalkin.

Grimalkin: *[Bounds after Benjamin]*

Benjamin: *[Starts running]*
I hope it is old Sassoonan! *[panting as he runs]* If it is, he will bake fish for thee, Grimalkin, and corn cakes for me!

[Enter Chief Sassoonan, Elk, Bear, and Beaver. Position puppets around a fire in the forest. Benjamin is watching from a distance.]

Narrator 3: Suddenly Benjamin burst full upon the Indians.

The splendor of the sight held him motionless. A great circle of fire was licking at the base of a white fir tree. Around the tree danced Chief Sassoonan and his three sons, Bear, Elk, and Beaver.

Benjamin: ***[Benjamin is still at a distance observing the Indians quietly.]***

Grimalkin, I know what they're doing. They are going to fell the tree and hollow out the bark to make a boat.

Narrator 4: The Indians did not hear Benjamin. They were too close to the crackling of the fire.

Benjamin: Benjamin stood in the distance under the shade of a tree. He quickly began to sketch the scene using his charcoal and board. But he was not happy with his drawing.

[Use the Benjamin puppet drawing and Grimalkin puppet lying down, curled up. Position Grimalkin on the branch of a tree from the scenery.]

Grimalkin: ***[Sits on the branch of the tree directly above Benjamin. Occasionally meows.]***

Benjamin: ***[Sadly]*** Oh, *Grimalkin*. How I long to paint them a good copper-brown. It seems as if I'm never content with my sketches.

Narrator 5: Just then the Indians spotted Benjamin and ran toward him, their voices raised in a shrill cry.

Grimalkin: ***[Trembling in fear, the cat leaps onto Benjamin's shoulder.]***

Benjamin: ***[In a soothing, gentle voice]*** Be not afraid, kitling. All will soon be quiet.

Narrator 1: Sassoonan was very pleased to see Benjamin and raised his hand to salute him.

Sassoonan: ***[In a deep, solemn voice]*** Itah! Itah, my little Quekel friends.

Narrator 2: Meanwhile, Bear, Elk and Beaver gathered around Benjamin's drawing board. Their serious, black eyes never changed expression. For a long time they stared quietly at the sketch.

Sassoonan: It is good!

Benjamin: ***[Speaks excitedly to Grimalkin]*** Chief Sassoonan, says that it's good! Did thee hear that, *Grimalkin*? Sassoonan says my sketch is good.

**Bear, Elk,
& Beaver:** ***[In unison]*** Amen!

Sassoonan: Yes, it is good. But missing something. Come, follow me. I teach you important lesson.

Narrator 3: The chief turns and walks away and his three sons follow. Benjamin quickly joins them. He was not afraid. Chief Sassoonan was a good friend of the West family and Papa greatly trusted him.

Narrator 4: Benjamin followed the chief and his sons until they reached the bank of a small river.

Sassoonan: Now we show you.

Narrator 5: The Indians knelt down by the riverbank. Bear and Beaver scooped up handfuls of red and yellow clay. Then with a small stone they began to grind the lumps of river clay on a large flat stone.

Narrator 1: Meanwhile, Elk, was gathering mussel shells. He mixed the river clay with bear grease and stirred and stirred until it formed a reddish-brown paste. At last, with a look of triumph, he handed the mixture to Benjamin and pointed to the drawing board.

Benjamin: ***[Shouting excitedly]*** *Grimalkin*, look! At last I have color! Color! Color!

Grimalkin: *[Leaps several times in the air]* Meow! Meow! Meow!

All Indians: *[Excitedly and in unison]* Amen! Amen! Amen!

Benjamin: Think about it, Grimalkin! The Indians like to paint, too. At last I've found some real school-fellows.

Narrator 2: And right there in the heart of Penn's Forest, Benjamin West had his first art class.

Narrator 3: Benjamin stayed with the Indians all day. When darkness began to fall, it was time for Benjamin to go home.

Benjamin: I must go now, Sassoonan. Thank you so much for everything!
[Walks away with Grimalkin.]

Sassoonan: *[Waves good-bye.]* Run! Run! This will be a cold night. Good-bye, little Quekel friends.

Lights go out to change the scene.

Scene Three Door-Latch Inn

Puppeteers move to the Door-Latch Inn scenery.

Lights are turned back on.

Narrator 4: Benjamin left the forest and ran back to the Inn. He could see the windows bright with fire-light. His body was weary, but his heart was full of joy. He now had color for his sketches!

Mamma: Benjamin, have thee and Grimalkin returned?

Benjamin: Yes, Mamma! I have something to show you. *[Shows her his drawing board.]*

Mamma: *[Looks at the board.]* Wherever did thee get color?

Benjamin: From the riverbed, Mamma. Chief Sassoonan and his sons showed me how to make color from the river clay.

Mamma: *[Slowly and thoughtfully speaks.]* Benjamin, does thee know that color is not necessary to thy well-being?

Benjamin: *[In a small voice]* Yes, Mamma.

Mamma: It is not like the sun that warms, or the rain that freshens, or the bread that nourishes. Does thee know this?

Benjamin: Yes, Mamma. I know.

Mamma: Very well, then. I shall give thee a stick of my indigo blue. With red and yellow from the earth and blue from my dye pot, thee can blend all the tints of the rainbow.

Benjamin: Thank you, Mamma. Thank you!!!

Narrator 5: Now that Benjamin had color he was excited to use it with his sketches. But he had a problem. He was not able to spread the colors on smoothly. He tried his fingers, but they were too pudgy. He tried a duck feather, but it made the colors spatter.

Narrator 1: Finally, he tried a dried reed of grass. It worked for a while, but soon a big glob of paint spilled from the reed and ruined his entire portrait of Dr. Moris . . . Benjamin asked his Uncle Phineas about real painters.

Phineas: *[Uncle Phineas puppet appears on stage.]*

Benjamin: Uncle Phineas, thee is a great merchant in the city of Philadelphia. Thee must know real painters. How do they apply their color?

Phineas: I am told that they use hair pencils. In no wise have I seen them myself, mind thee. I have only heard about them.

Benjamin: Hair pencils?

Phineas: Aye, hair pencils.

Benjamin: But, what kind of hair, Uncle?

Phineas: Camel's hair fastened to a goose quill.

Benjamin: Are there any camels in Penn's Forest?

Phineas: Oh no! They live in the deserts of Africa. *[Uncle Phineas exits.]*

Narrator 2: Benjamin was heartsick. At last he had color, but it did him no good if he did not have hair pencils to paint with. Benjamin put his river clay paints and his indigo blue stick away.

Benjamin: *[Speaking to Grimalkin.]* I don't care a fig about color!

Narrator 3: Grimalkin and Benjamin sat by the fire. Benjamin longed to paint, but he still had no hair pencils.

Benjamin: *[Speaking to Grimalkin.]* Would thee like to sit for thy portrait? But mind thee, it will have to be in charcoal—black as thy fur.

Grimalkin: Meow. Meow.

Narrator 4: Grimalkin was a fine sitter. He posed very quietly—except for the very tip of his tail, which twitched back and forth, back and forth.

Grimalkin: *[Move the Grimalkin puppet slightly from side to side.]*
Meow. Meow.

Narrator 5: Benjamin sketched quickly. He knew that guests would soon be arriving at the Inn and that Grimalkin would grow tired of sitting.

Benjamin: Thy whiskers are not like ordinary cats, Grimalkin. They stand out straight and orderly. Now I will draw your soft, silken tail . . .
[Excitedly] Of course! Your soft silken tail! Why didn't I think of it before?

Narrator 1: Benjamin had a brilliant idea. He knew where he could get fur for a hair pencil. He ran for Mamma's scissors, a goose quill, his river clay paints, and Grimalkin's half-finished portrait.
[Walking Benjamin puppet moves around the Inn.]
[Optional: Shadow puppets of such objects as scissors, goose quill, jugs of paint, can appear on the stage as they are named. They can float in the air or sit on the table.]

Narrator 2: Benjamin picked up the scissors to cut Grimalkin's fur. But Grimalkin would have none of it.

Grimalkin: *[Climbs up on a high shelf.]*

Benjamin: Come down, Grimalkin.

Narrator 3: As Grimalkin leaped down from his perch, Benjamin grabbed him and the fur on Grimalkin's back and tail bristled up in fear.

Benjamin: Why how nice of thee to bristle up! I can cut thy hair easily now.

- Narrator 4:** And indeed he did. He cut the long hairs at the very tip of Grimalkin's tail.
Benjamin tied the little bundle of tail fur with one of his own long hairs, and then fastened it to the goose quill.
- Narrator 5:** Benjamin hurried to try out his new hair pencil. He painted Grimalkin's eyes a clear green. Then he looked at Grimalkin and his portrait side by side.
- Benjamin:** *[With a laugh]* They are the same as a pair of boots! Thee, Grimalkin, is my closest friend. When I am an old man with white hair, I shall remember how thee furnished my first paint-brush.
- Narrator 1:** Benjamin pressed his head close against Grimalkin's fur.
- Grimalkin:** Meow. *[Rubs against Benjamin.]*

Lights go out to show lapse of time.

Scene Four Door-Latch Inn

Benjamin and Grimalkin are on stage sitting by the fire.

Benjamin is painting and Grimalkin is sitting at his feet.

- Narrator 2:** After Benjamin was supplied with paints and brushes, there was no stopping him. He painted landscape after landscape, portrait after portrait. Nobody could deny that he was a gifted artist.
- Narrator 3:** Uncle Phineas took him to Philadelphia, where he met a painter who gave him books to read about painting. Benjamin studied hard and painted whenever he had the chance.
- Narrator 4:** One day he was invited to attend the Academy of Philadelphia to study history. This would change his life forever. He began to paint scenes from ancient and modern history, and with his gift he transformed the way artists paint history!
- Narrator 5:** Over time, Benjamin traveled to Europe to study the great Italian artists and their masterpieces. He met influential people who admired his artistic ability and assisted him greatly.
- [Optional: A small ship puppet and a few ocean waves can appear on the stage.]*
- Narrator 1:** Benjamin West was commissioned by England's King George III to be his court painter. He gained fame in this position and was one of the founders of the prestigious Royal Academy of Arts in London.
- Narrator 2:** Many struggling artists came from America to his art studio to be taught by Benjamin. He tutored three generations of American artists, which earned him the title of the "Father of American Painting."
- Narrator 3:** All of this happened because a young boy, with a love for painting and the favor of God on his life, pursued his dream and never gave up. He was a painter of history . . . a painter of "His Story!" *[Narrator points toward heaven.]* And his name is Benjamin West.
- ALL:** Have children gather in front of the puppet stage to sing as a group.
Sing the AMO® theme song, "I Am a Promise" and "Simple Gifts."

THE END