



EDUCATOR GUIDE



SUGAR SKULL! A Día De Muertos Musical Adventure

This guide is geared toward teachers of grades K - 4

Sponsored by:



Supported by:



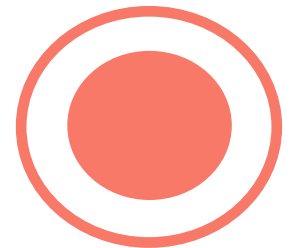
TABLE OF CONTENTS

About This Guide

Use this guide to help your students anticipate, investigate, and reflect upon your live performance experience. This guide is geared toward teachers of grades K - 4.

IN THIS GUIDE

3	Introducing the Performance
5	What to Expect
6	Being an Audience Member
7	Essential Questions
10	Pre-Performance Lesson Activities
15	Post-Performance Lesson Activities
18	Additional Resources
19	About Portland Ovation
20	Student Response Form
22	Teacher Response Form



The great thing about the arts is that they can often evolve to meet their context. That means that many of the activities shared are flexible to a lot of different contexts depending on how you choose to frame them in your class. We know you all are experts on your classroom and students, so we invite you to use these lessons and activities as guideposts and adapt them to fit your classroom management style, range of student ability, and time constraints.

LEARNING CONNECTIONS

Social Studies: Día de Muertos

Spanish

Social-Emotional Learning: Self-Awareness (identifying personal, cultural, and linguistic assets), Social Awareness (identifying diverse social norms, including unjust

LEARNING STANDARDS ICON KEY



Educators, we invite you to share with us what you did in your classroom around this guide or the production. You can email eschildkret@portlandovations.org or reach us via [Facebook](#) or [Instagram](#).

We want to hear and see what great learning is happening in your classrooms.

Introducing the Performance

It is often helpful to share some context with your students before they attend a live performance. Read below for more information on the performance you're coming to see.

About the Performance

SUGAR SKULL! A Día de Muertos Musical Adventure is a touring bilingual musical that uses traditional regional music and dance from Mexico to tell the story of twelve-year-old Vita Flores. Vita thinks her family has gone loco planning a celebration for deceased loved ones. Why throw a party for the dead? But when a spirited candy skeleton suddenly sprigs to life, Vita finds herself on a magical, musical journey to unravel the true meaning of Día de Muertos. With her guide, a charismatic skeleton with a secret or two, Vita dances with ancient ancestors, sings with a sorrowful sorceress, escapes the trickster Chaneques, and even meets the famous Catrina Calavera.

Here are a few characters you'll meet in *SUGAR SKULL!*

- Vita
- Sugar Skull
- Marigold
- Mamá
- Abuelita
- Catrina Calavera
- El Coco
- Chaneques
- Meshica
- Aztecas
- Viejitos



Vita and Sugar Skull

About the Company

SUGAR SKULL! A Día de Muertos Musical Adventure was developed by Rhythm of the Arts, Gergory Jafari Van Acker, Sinuhé Padilla-Isunza and Elena Aroz, with Mexico Beyond Mariachi.

Rhythm of the Arts was founded in 2005 by Peter Bogdanos as a boutique production and management company for culturally specific projects and performing artists. Under the leadership of Leah Keith, Rhythm of the Arts has recently expanded its scope as a booking agency, with a carefully curated roster of artists that responds to the current needs of presenters. We celebrate authentic storytelling, multi-disciplinary projects, cross-cultural collaborations, and live music. We value the strong connections between artist and audience and take pride in creating experiences and lifting up voices that bring us together in community.



RHYTHM OF THE ARTS

Gregory Jafari Van Acker *Playwright* (They / He) is NY based casting director, author, educator, and playwright/lyricist who loves making connections and bringing people together, especially in the company of team members from Bass/Valle Casting and The Casting Collaborative!

Sinuhé Padilla-Isunza *Composer and Orchestrator* (Si-noo-eh Pa-dee-yah) is the founder and director of Jarana Beat. The Mexican musicologist, producer, composer, and artistic director has been responsible for leading multiple compelling artistic and social projects around the world. His initiative champions traditional and contemporary Afro-Amerindian *music and culture from Central and South America, but his true passion is rooted in his love for Mexico, Nahuatl cosmogony, sacred Aztec music and dance.*

Elena Aroz *Director* is a stage director of theater, opera, multi-media performance, and theatrical large-scale immersive events, working internationally, Off-Broadway, and across the country. Elena is attracted to epic stories, and her productions are known for huge dance-like theatrics and acutely naturalistic acting. *The New York Times* has praised Aroz's productions as "form-busting and gorgeous," "striking," "primal," "wild," "stirring," and "refreshingly natural," *The Boston Globe* as "riveting," "dreamy," and "vivid," and *The New Yorker* as "refreshing." *Time Out New York* mentions, "Elena Aroz is a director with deep wells of imagination; she seems drawn to magical realist work."

Mexico Beyond Mariachi is a multi-cultural ensemble of professional musicians, actors, dancers and teaching artists, who perform traditional music and dance from Mexico as opposed to the overly stylized "Folklorico" that most people associate with Mexican culture. This focus on the "Folk" music and dance of Mexico creates a visceral connection with the audiences of all ages. Their philosophy is rooted in the belief that art and culture are an integral part of the development of every individual's outlook on life. Personal engagement, community experiences, and the celebration of commonality are themes Mexico Beyond Mariachi bring to the stage as well as to extensive arts-in-education offerings (residencies, workshops, and lecture demonstrations). *imagination; she seems drawn to magical realist work."*

What To Expect

The Performance

- The performance is 60 minutes long
- The set and costumes are brightly colorful, and based on Latine traditions.
- At times, performers wear makeup representing a sugar skull, a symbol of Día de Muertos.
- A large puppet is featured as part of the performance.
- The performance is presented in English with some Spanish.

The Sound

- SUGAR SKULL! Is a musical and features Mariachi music. You can hear examples of the music in the promo video found on our website: <https://portlandovations.org/event/sugar-skull-a-dia-de-muertos-musical-adventure-2/>
- In our production, the music will be pre-recorded and played through speakers, rather than performed live.
- Music is upbeat and lyrics are in Spanish.
- Dancing is also an important part of the performance. Dancers perform several traditional Latine dance styles along to the music.

The Lights

- This performance uses dramatic, theatrical lighting.
- Lighting can be bright and colorful or dark and moody depending on the scene and the emotions.
- At times the stage will go fully dark.

Resources

- Plan your visit to Merrill Auditorium: <https://portlandovations.org/about/accessibility-merrill-auditorium/>
- Learn more about accessibility at Portland Oventions: <https://portlandovations.org/about/accessibility/>



Being an Audience Member

An audience member is a part of a larger community – an audience – and you all work together to create your theater experience. Audience members play a special and important role in the performance. The performers are very aware of the audience while they perform. Sharing their hard work and joy with you is one of the best parts of being a performer. Each performance calls for different audience responses. Lively bands, musicians and dancers may desire audience members to clap and move to the beat. Other performers require silent focus on the stage and talking from the audience can be distracting. A theater is designed to magnify sound and even the smallest whispers can be heard throughout the auditorium. The company of *SUGAR SKULL* highly encourages clapping and laughing at the parts of the performance that you enjoy.

As you enjoy the show, think about being a part of the performance.

- What are the differences between attending a live performance and going to a movie or watching television?
- What are some different types of live performances? How many can you name?
- What kind of responses might an audience give to different types of performances?
- What are the different cues that a performer will give you so that you know how to respond? For example, might they bow or pause for applause?



The interior of Merrill Auditorium

Essential Questions

What is Día de Muertos?

Día de Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is a traditional two-day holiday on November 1 and 2 that celebrates, honors, and remembers deceased loved ones. During this time, the spirits of the deceased are believed to return to visit their loved ones. Although Día de Muertos follows Halloween, as celebrated in the USA, and the two holidays share the symbolism of the skeleton, they are not the same. Día de Muertos is an entirely different holiday. Día de Muertos has its origins in both Spanish Catholicism and in indigenous religions, including an Aztec festival dedicated to the goddess Mictecacihuatl (mik-TE-ka-si-wa-tul).. During Día de Muertos, families prepare to welcome the spirits of their loved ones by creating ofrendas, decorating with papel picado, marigolds (cempasúchil), skulls (calaveras), and skeletons (calacas), and participating in celebrations like parades, parties, and gatherings. Día de Muertos is a vibrant and colorful celebration that emphasizes remembering and celebrating the lives of those who have passed away. It's a time for families and communities to come together, sharing stories and memories of their loved ones while rejoicing in the cycle of life.



What is the significance of the sugar skull in Día de Muertos?

Perhaps the most iconic symbol of Día de Muertos is the sugar skull, or calavera (which means “skull” in Spanish). The imagery of the calavera is seen everywhere during Día de Muertos: in decorations, on faces and clothing, and in art and literature. Sugar skulls are given as gifts to children and family members, placed on ofrendas, and in cemeteries. Traditional sugar skulls are made of a paste of sugar, water, and meringue powder pressed into skull-shaped molds and then decorated in bright colors with intricate patterns, flowers, and animals. Sugar skulls can also be made with other ingredients, like chocolate, almonds, honey, and amaranth. Their bright colors, intricate designs, and sweet base serve as a joyful reminder of loved ones who have passed away and a meaningful gift to the living.

Sugar skulls can be decorated in all kinds of colors, but some colors hold special meanings:

- Red: Blood (and family ties)
- Orange: The sun
- Yellow: The marigold, or cempasúchil
- Purple: Pain
- Pink: Hope, celebration
- Black: the land of the dead



What is an ofrenda?

Preparing an ofrenda, or altar, to honor deceased relatives plays a central role in the celebration of Día de Muertos. Ofrendas can be built in homes or in the community and typically include photos, mementos, candles, marigolds and favorite foods and beverages of the deceased loved one. While ofrendas can look very different depending on family or community's traditions, they often include a few shared elements:

- Arches: An arch over the ofrenda of papel picado or marigolds represents the pathway welcoming spirits back into the living world.
- Three levels: Many ofrendas will have 3 levels built into them representing different stages of life, different things to welcome the loved one, and other concepts.
- Photos of the loved one: Perhaps the most important part of the ofrenda, as they are made to honor specific people.
- Earth, Air, Fire, and Water: These four elements are often depicted with objects on ofrendas.
- Marigolds, candles, and incense: All of these elements serve different roles in guiding the loved one safely to and from the land of the dead.
- Food and other favorite objects: Pan de Muerto (a sweet bread traditionally baked and eaten during Día de Muertos), favorite foods of the loved one, and objects or art representing their favorite things adorn ofrendas.



PRE-PERFORMANCE LESSON ACTIVITIES

Here are some ideas for lesson activities that expand on the essential questions, topics, and themes of *SUGAR SKULL*.

Glossary

Día de Muertos: Day of the Dead is a vibrant and culturally significant Mexican holiday where families honor and celebrate the lives of deceased loved ones through joyful remembrance, colorful ofrendas, and many different traditions.

Ofrenda: An “ofrenda” is an elaborate and decorative altar or offering, adorned with photos, favorite items, food, and symbolic elements, created to honor and remember deceased loved ones during the Día de Muertos celebration.

Abuelita: A term of endearment that affectionately means “grandma” in Spanish.

Pan de Muerto: A traditional sweet bread baked and enjoyed during Día de Muertos, typically decorate with bone-shaped patterns and eaten as part of the celebration.

Nahuatl: An indigenous language of Mexico, historically spoken by some of the Aztecs and still used by some indigenous communities in Mexico today.

Marigold (Cempasúchil): A bright orange flower used abundantly in decorations and altars during Día de Muertos, believed to guide the spirits of the dead back to the living world. Cempasúchil (sem-pa-SOO-chil) is a Nahuatl word.



ACTIVITY: 1, 2, 3, 4

This group counting activity combines numbers and movement to encourage students to collaborate to count in different languages. It celebrates the languages students speak in your classroom and allows students whose first language isn't English to become the experts.



Materials:

Open space



Procedure:

1. Invite students to find a space in the room where they can move up and down freely and safely.
2. Introduce the activity: explain to students that they'll be using their bodies to count from 1 to 4. 1 is closest to the floor, and 4 is furthest away from the floor. Lead students through finding appropriate body positions for all four numbers in order: 1, 2, 3, and then 4.
3. Lead the students through a round in English. Say the numbers 1, 2, 3, and 4 in any order, inviting students to match their body positions to the number. Try varying the speed with which you move between numbers, counting quickly and slowly.
4. Introduce the activity, this time in Spanish. Introduce the numbers 1- 4 in Spanish: Uno, Dos, Tres, Quatro. Lead students through finding appropriate body positions.
5. Repeat the activity in Spanish.
6. Ask students what other languages they can use to count to four. Invite students to lead the activity, demonstrating each number with their bodies and then leading the whole class through a round in their language.

Reflection

- How successful were we as a class in this activity? What skills or strategies did you use to be successful?
- What was it like following instructions in English? In other languages?
- What was it like leading the class?
- How might we use the skills/strategies we practiced in other areas of our classroom?

ACTIVITY: Artifacts

Artifacts “hooks” students into inquiry by introducing an object or picture and asking them to make inferences about it. This strategy is a great way to introduce *SUGAR SKULL* to your students by inviting them to use their critical thinking skills to interpret photos of the production. This strategy can be done as a class or in small groups.



Materials:

Photographs from the play, *SUGAR SKULL!* (see pages 13 & 14 for photographs, or scattered throughout this Educator Guide)

Procedure:

1. Gather photos of *SUGAR SKULL* and choose one to begin inquiry. Invite students to sit in a position where they can easily see the photo.
2. Explain to the class that this is a photo of the play they’re about to see. Ask students to look closely at the picture and describe what they see.
3. Invite each student to make an observation about the object.
4. Once students have made their observations about what they can see, ask them to analyze or interpret the picture. Who are the characters? Where are they? What might be going on in this picture. In this moment, there are no right or wrong answers. Invite lots of different interpretations.
5. Continue working through photos in this way, ask students to first describe and then interpret what they see. Record students interpretations.
6. At the conclusion of the activity, invite students to remember their interpretations as they watch *SUGAR SKULL*. You may want to reflect as a class after you see the production: how accurate were your inferences?





POST-PERFORMANCE LESSON ACTIVITIES

Post-Performance Discussion Questions

1. What moments of the performance were most memorable for you?
2. What was something new that you learned about Día de Muertos from watching the performance?
3. How does Vita change from the beginning to the end of the performance? What does she learn is the true meaning of Día de Muertos?
4. What does tradition mean to you?
5. What is a holiday or tradition that you celebrate with your family and friends?

ACTIVITY: Make Your Own Papel Picado

Papel picado means “punched paper” and is found throughout Mexico as decoration for a variety of events and holidays, including Día de Muertos. Create your own papel picado following these simple instructions.

Materials:

Tissue Paper in a variety of colors, cut into squares (10” x 10” or smaller)
Scissors
Marker
Glue
String

Procedure:

1. Fold the tissue paper in half. Fold it in half again until you have thin rectangle.
2. Make small cuts along the bottom of the long rectangle to create a border.
3. Using the marker, design a pattern of shapes on either side of the long edge of the tissue paper.
4. Cut out shapes with scissors.
5. Open the tissue paper up to reveal the complete pattern.
6. Create strings of papel picado by lining up the banners side by side along a length of string. Fold the top of each banner over the string and glue it in place.
7. Hang your papel picado up in your classroom.



ACTIVITY: Make Your Own Paper Marigolds

Orange marigolds, or Cempasúchil, are an important symbol of Día de Muertos, and during the holiday real and paper Cempasúchil decorate homes, cemeteries, and ofrendas. Create your own paper flowers following the instructions below.

Materials:

Orange tissue paper cut into 4" x 4" squares
Green pipe cleaners
Scissors (optional)

Procedure:

1. Stack 5-6 tissue paper squares on top of each other.
2. Accordion fold the stack of tissue paper, using firm pressure on a hard surface to make sharp creases.
3. Bend a pipe cleaner in half and place the bend over the center of the folded tissue paper. Twist the pipe cleaner together to create the stem of the flower.
4. Carefully separate the layers of tissue paper, pulling them towards the center to create the petals of the flower.
5. If desired, trim the ends of the tissue paper petals to shape them into a marigold.



ACTIVITY: Make Your Own Ofrenda

There are a lot of ways to make ofrendas, but one of the easiest ways to do this in the classroom is to create a shoebox ofrenda. This version uses simple materials, as well as photos, and items from loved ones students bring from home. You may even incorporate your papel picado and paper marigolds in your ofrendas. Read more about the elements of an ofrenda on page 9.

[For a fantastic tutorial on creating a shoebox ofrenda, see this video posted by the Columbia Heights Library's program, HeightsNEXT](#)



Materials:

Shoeboxes for every student in the classroom
Copies of photos of loved ones and images of items they loved brought from home.
Craft paper
markers
Glue
Scissors
Printed pictures of candles, calaveras, etc.

Procedure:

1. Collect your materials: invite students to bring images of a deceased loved one. Students may also bring pictures or small items that represent things their loved one treasured. Augment students materials with pictures of things like candles, calaveras, marigolds, and food. Students may also want to draw their own items on craft paper.
2. Construct the arch: set the shoebox on its side. Use three sides of the frame of the shoebox to create your arch. Decorate the arch in marigolds and/or papel picado.
3. Lay out your ofrenda: use the bottom, back, and top of the inside of the shoe box as your three levels and lay out photos of the loved one the ofrenda honors, items they treasured, other elements, and decorations.
4. Glue/tape/place items: Once you're satisfied with the layout, secure items with glue or tape. Display finished ofrendas in the classroom.

Reflection

- What do you notice about the ofrendas we created? How are they similar? How are they different?
- How did you decide what to include in your ofrenda?
- Why do you think creating ofrendas is a central part of Día de Muertos?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Learn more about Día de Muertos, including histories of the holiday and its key elements, crafts, and recipes: <https://dayofthedead.holiday/>
- Smithsonian Latino Museum's Día de Muertos learning kit with a slide show of information and activities created for classrooms: <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/day-of-the-dead-learning-kit/E1hWiAVMTjoalOQm>
- Learn more about SUGAR SKULL and the team who created it: <https://www.rhythmofthearts.com/sugar-skull-live>



ABOUT PORTLAND OVATIONS

Portland Oventions, founded in 1931, produces dynamic performing arts events including classical music, jazz, opera, dance, theater, and Broadway. We believe that cultural enrichment should be high quality and accessible to all. Oventions collaborates with other nonprofit organizations, education systems, and the business sector to promote lifelong learning while celebrating the power and virtuosity of the performing arts. We bring the exhilaration of the performing arts into our communities with free events as part of Oventions Offstage, connecting artists and audiences. Join us at unexpected “art happenings,” classroom workshops, masterclasses, community discussions, and pre-performance lectures to explore together the relevance and connection of the performing arts to our lives.

Land Acknowledgment

Portland Oventions’ programs are presented on Wabanaki land, home of the Maliseet, Mi’kmaq, Passamaquoddy, Abenaki and Penobscot Nations, their elders past and present, and future generations.

We encourage you to learn more and take action in support of Maine’s Indigenous communities through the following organizations

[Abbe Museum](#)

Maine’s premier museum dedicated to indigenous history and culture. Their mission is to inspire new learning about the Wabanaki Nations with every visit.

[Maine-Wabanaki Reach](#)

A Native-led non-profit that supports the self-determination of Wabanaki people through education, truth-telling, restorative justice, and restorative practices in Wabanaki and Maine communities.

Created and written by Dr. Liz Schildkret

Designed by Katie Day

© Portland Oventions 2024

We want to know what thought about the performance. You can write your answers below or draw a picture on the back of this page. Thank you!

PERFORMANCE *Sugar Skull! A Día de Muertos Musical Adventure*

SCHOOL NAME

TEACHER NAME:

May we use your n

share your comments

What did you

did you like that part

What was something that you learned during the performance?

What would you like to tell other kids about

What types of performance would you like Portland Oventions to offer in the future? (Feel free to share what type of art you are interested in (theater, dance, music), what cultures you might like to see, what topics the art might connect with, or specific artists.)

MAIL RESPONSES TO: Portland Oventions 120 Exchange St Portland, ME 04101
SCANNED RESPONSES TO: offstage@portlandovations.org

We want to know what thought about the performance.
Draw a picture of a part of *Sugar Skull!* that you liked. Thank you!



Please scan and email to offstage@portlandovations.org or mail to Portland Ovations 120 Exchange St Portland, ME 04101

Please take a few moments to fill out this survey after you attend the performance. You can also [online here](#). Your response provides valuable insight on the impact, accessibility, and relevancy of the School Time Performance Series and will allow us to improve and strengthen the program. Thank you.

PERFORMANCE *Skull! A Día De Muertos Musical Adventure* November 12, 2024

TEACHER NAME _____ GRADE(S) OF STUDENTS _____

SCHOOL NAME: _____ CITY/TOWN: _____

EMAIL ADDRESS: _____

From your perspective as a teacher, how would you rate

-

. What made this a valuable experience for your students? (If it wasn't, what can we do

_____ was your primary reason for choosing to bring your students to

- wanted my students to experience the performing arts.
- he performance _____ with my curriculum goals.
- date and time _____ performance fit our schedule.
- he ticket price _____
- ther (please specify): _____

How did this live performance connect to or enhance your curriculum?

Did you use the Educators Guide provided by Portland Ovation before or after the performance

Why or why not?

. How would you rate the following components of attending the School Time Performance?

Reserving & paying for tickets	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Communication performance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Arrival at the	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Departure from	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

What types of performances would you like to bring your students to in the future?
 free to share art forms, topics/themes, specific artists, etc

A number of individuals and organizations make it possible for Portland Oventions these School Time Performance tickets at extremely discounted rates. Is there anything you'd like them to know in terms of your experiences or its impact on your students?