

Study-Guide for  
**My Impractical Life**



**Character Education • Drama Activities • Literary Analysis**

# My Impractical Life • Study Guide

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## The Play

### SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

In an innovative mix of mime and monologue, Trent Arterberry tells the semi-autobiographical story of his own adolescent journey to discover what he loves, and then to turn his passion into a career that pays the bills.

Arterberry arrives on stage with a squeal in an imaginary "souped-up sports car," which he smugly assures us he can afford thanks to his long and lucrative career as a mime. This scene sets the tone of both sincerity and self-parody which characterizes Arterberry's tale.

Other scenes similarly weave comedic mime with dramatic ideas. The classic "invisible box" routine takes on a new dimension when Arterberry turns it into a struggle against the limitations parents, teachers and classmates put up to thwart his desires. His own internal conflicts about whether to follow the passions of his heart or the dictates of his head develop into a literally "side-splitting" slapstick fight with himself.

Arterberry's pursuit to figure out what to do with his life steers him through terrain with which any teenager will identify: hours spent escaping into music, video games, TV and the internet; extravagant efforts to achieve athletic prowess and pop stardom; visits to an eccentric psychiatrist; and a romantic crush that devolves into a static-ridden cell phone break-up.

After an ill-planned mountain climb and nearly fatal fall at a camp for troubled youth, Arterberry ultimately recognizes his own true values. The realization that he must use his head in order to follow his heart empowers him to overcome his obstacles and pursue his dreams.

## THEMES EXPLORED IN THE PLAY

- Influences of pop culture on oneself and peers
- Important elements of healthy personal relationships
- Self-awareness, self-respect, values, and responsibility
- Creative arts as a possible career choice
- Impacts of various media and technology on oneself
- Consequences of personal choices

*My Impractical Life* is a unique performance of mime and monologue created to inspire human potential. It helps students examine influences on them from significant adults, peers, pop culture, media, and technology.

The program encourages students to explore the nature of relationships with others, their values, the consequences of their choices, and how they respond to pressures around them. It helps students to see they can develop an authentic sense of themselves in the world, and to celebrate their individual struggle and capacity for creativity as a crucial part of learning and growing.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

This study guide was created to prepare students for the performance of *My Impractical Life*. It is designed to assist the teacher in making educational connections in the following areas:

- Drama/Mime
- Language Arts
- Character Education/Social Responsibility

### TRENT ARTERBERRY

Trent Arterberry has been a mime artist for nearly 40 years, and has given over six thousand performances. His career has taken him around the world and into such renowned venues as Radio City Music Hall in New York, The QE2 luxury liner and Toronto's Maple Leaf Gardens. His awards include Best Local Production at the Victoria (CA) Fringe Festival, and Performing Artist of the Year for the (US) National Association of Campus Activities.

Years ago, Trent decided to leave pre-med studies at UCLA to study mime and fulfill his dream to become a creative performer, eventually training with the world-renowned French master, Marcel Marceau. *My Impractical Life* is the story of how it happened.

## Pre-performance Activities

### DISCUSSION

*Accessing prior knowledge, teachers may want to prepare students for the show and help them to focus their viewing*

- Have the students seen a mime? Where? What do they remember about the performance?
- Discuss how this play may be different from what the students may expect from a mime show. See “About Mime and the Play” below.
- Explain that mime uses gesture, facial expression and body language to communicate ideas and feelings.
- Ask for examples of how we use these elements of mime in daily life?
- What do they think would be the greatest challenge of a mime performance?
- What role does the audience play in creating a positive live experience?
- If your class needs a reminder about polite behavior during viewing, this is a good time to remind them to turn off cell phones and to support the performer.

### About Mime and the Play

Marcel Marceau, the world-famous French mime, toured from the 1950s until his death in 2007. Marceau's image, with the white face make-up and striped shirt, has defined how we imagine mimes to be.

*My Impractical Life* is a physical theatre play that incorporates monologue with mime to enable the telling of a larger story and themes. In contrast to Marceau's solo performance, which consisted of a series of short sketches with no apparent thematic connection, *My Impractical Life* tells a complete story from beginning to end, and uses many of the literary devices we would encounter in a novel or other dramatic text.

### WHAT TO WATCH AND LISTEN FOR DURING THE PERFORMANCE

*Giving the students something specific to focus on encourages active watching and listening during the performance and provides a starting point for follow-up activities*

- How does Trent create multiple characters (examples: head and heart using the screen; puppet playing the psychiatrist)
- How does music create mood (examples: rock and roll for rock star scene; Debussy for the heartbreak scene)
- How does Trent use mime illusions to represent what is going on in his life? (examples: the wall = obstacles; sports car = journey through life)

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## Post-performance Activities: Character Education

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Enhancing Self-esteem—engaging in activities and associating with people who make you feel good about yourself and your choices
- Setting and Achieving Goals—set goals, outline plans to achieve them, and consider possible obstacles and how to deal with them
- Dealing with Pressures—finding healthy and effective ways to deal with pressures from self and others
- Clarifying Values—know your values and stay true to them; make your own choices, don't just go along with the crowd

### DISCUSSION

- Compare and contrast your understanding of the situation he faced as a young man with your own.
- Identify emotions and outside pressures which influenced Mr. Arterberry. What are your own? What conflicts are you experiencing?
- Who can support you around your dreams?
- What actions can you take to make your dreams real and what might the consequences of those actions be?

### ACTIVITY

Create a comparison chart for yourself and the young Mr. Arterberry. (see Student Activity Sheet #1)

## Post-Performance Activities: Drama/Mime

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

#### Elements of Drama

- **Role/Character:** analyzing the background, motivation, speech, and actions of characters to build roles; using voice, stance, gesture, and facial expression to portray character.
- **Focus and Emphasis:** using a wide range of devices to highlight the central theme for the audience; making deliberate artistic choices to sharpen focus.

#### Creating and Presenting

- Engage actively in drama exploration and role play, with a focus on examining multiple perspectives and possible outcomes related to complex issues, themes, and relationships from a wide variety of sources.

#### Reflecting, Responding Analyzing

- Construct personal interpretations of drama works, connecting drama issues and themes. Evaluate, using drama terminology, how effectively drama works and shared drama experiences use the elements of drama to engage the audience and communicate a theme or message.

### ACTIVITIES

*Before assigning the drama activities, do some simple warm up exercises.*

- **Conversations:** in partners have a short conversation using only gestures and facial expressions. Share your conversations with the class, as they guess what the conversation is about.
- **Occupations:** individually, demonstrate an occupational choice using mime and movement. The class can guess the occupation or join in when they know what occupation is being acted out.
- **Conflicts:** in pairs, use drama to demonstrate a student discussing career choices with an adult (parent, teacher, guidance councillor) or even a peer. Perform two versions. In one the listener is against the idea; in the other, the listener is supportive. Share these conversations with the class.
- **Statues:** in triads, create a tableau to show abstract concepts such as conflict, overcoming obstacles, perseverance, struggle, victory, celebration. Students decide on a topic, form the tableau, check for elements such as levels, facial expressions, body shapes etc. Share tableaux with whole class. Bring to life through movement and speaking a word or phrase.
- **Sculptures:** in pairs, one person sculpts the partner into a shape symbolizing one of the concepts above. Students do a gallery walk to view the sculptures. Students switch roles and repeat the activity.

## Language Arts: Learning Outcomes

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

*These PLOs are adapted from the BC Ministry of Education Integrated Resource Package grades 10, 11 and 12. Teachers may want to put them on the board to provide a clear purpose and focus for students:*

- Interpret the main ideas, events and themes of the play.
- Organize your ideas about the play using graphic organizers.
- Explain the effects of literary devices, including symbolism, parody, satire and irony.
- Identify and explain connections between what you saw and your own ideas.
- Describe the tone and mood of *My Impractical Life*.
- Explain the influence of others' ideas and contributions to the development of your own personal thoughts and feelings.

### CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

*From The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Language Arts. By completing the activities in the study guide, the students express their response to the performance and make connections*

#### Oral and Visual Communication

- **Listening to Understand:** listen in order to understand and respond appropriately in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes.
- **Speaking to Communicate:** use speaking skills and strategies appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- **Reflecting on Skills and Strategies:** reflect on and identify their strengths as listeners and speakers, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful in oral communication situations.

#### Writing

- **Developing and Organizing Content:** generate, gather, and organize ideas and information to write for an intended purpose and audience.
- **Using Knowledge of Form and Style:** draft and revise their writing, using a variety of literary, informational, and graphic forms and stylistic elements appropriate for the purpose and audience.
- **Applying Knowledge of Conventions:** use editing, proofreading, and publishing skills and strategies, and knowledge of language conventions, to correct errors, refine expression, and present their work effectively.



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## Language Arts: Story Structure/Plot Diagram

**REVIEW** Accessing former knowledge about story structure will focus the students. Review vocabulary: prologue, conflict, rising action, climax, resolution.

- DISCUSSION**
- How did the play open?
  - What was the confusion (conflict) that Trent felt at the beginning? What did his father want him to do? What did his teachers want him to do?
  - As the action builds in the story, identify the attempts to resolve the conflict. What were some of the careers he imagined doing? What happened to his dreams of finding happiness in romance? What did Trent ultimately dream of becoming?
  - When his parents disapproved of his choices, where did his parents send him?
  - What is the climax of the play? What event caused Trent to realize what he should do with his life? How was the confusion resolved?

**ACTIVITY** Using the discussion above, individually or as a group, complete the Story Structure/Plot Diagram. (Activity Sheet #2)

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## Language Arts: Forms of Humour

### A Guide to Humour in the Play

- SATIRE** *Satire* is a form of humor that has an element of ridicule. For example, when the doctor offers him pills within 60 seconds of meeting him, Trent is *satirizing* modern, drug-dispensing psychiatry. Yet the tone is also touching because, *ironically*, the psychiatrist is the one person who actually listens to Trent and gives him good advice.
- IRONY** How does the use of the puppet enhance the comedy in the psychiatrist scene? The doctor/psychiatrist figure in society is one that is respected. Using a cartoonish puppet to play this respected character creates a funny *contrast* to what might be expected. It is *ironic* that this small puppet plays a powerful and wise doctor. It is similar to the character of Yoda in Star Wars where a small, toady character plays the all-knowing Jedi master. Bonus question: Why does the puppet speak with a German accent?
- PARODY** Trent is *parodying* the vanity of the rock star with his elaborate dressing room preparations. We enjoy seeing an exaggeration of the familiar.

The opening of the show, when Trent drives onto stage in an imaginary sports car, becomes a *self-parody* when Trent talks about how his successful mime career has enabled him to buy a fancy car (which exists only in his imagination). It also *foreshadows* the fact that both self-confidence and self-deception play important roles in Trent's journey.

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## Language Arts: Forms of Humour

- DISCUSSION**
- Discuss various forms of humor with students (verbal, slap-stick, physical, visual, etc).
  - Where do they encounter humour (film, TV, comics, cartoons, among peers)
  - What do they find funny? What do they not “get”?
  - Are their forms of humour which are funny to the perpetrator but not to the target? Discuss in terms of consequences.
  - How has the literary device of humor been used throughout literature?
  - What scenes made you laugh? Why were they funny?

### ACTIVITY

*The play, Walking Through Walls, uses humor to make the show fun and engaging but also to communicate its message. Let's see how Trent used different forms of humour.*

Using the Guide to Humour, help students analyze the types of humour used in specific scenes. Have students fill out Student Activity Sheet #3, filling in the scenes where the corresponding form of humour was used. Use the Story Structure/Plot Diagram to help students remember all of the scenes.

## Language Arts: Theatrical Device and Mood

**DISCUSSION** Mood: A feeling or a state of mind.

- What parts pulled you into the story and made you think, feel or laugh?
- What scenes were the most powerful or emotional for you? (Students can use the plot diagram to remind them of the storyline.)
- What helped to create the mood (the movement, music, Trent's body language)?

**ACTIVITY** Think, Pair, Share:

Using Student Activity Sheet #4, students work in pairs to identify the mood in key scenes and their personal responses to parts of the play.

**VIEWER RESPONSE** Ask a few students to share ideas with the whole group

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## Language Arts: Symbolism

**SYMBOLISM** In literature, symbolism is used to provide meaning to the writing beyond the story-line. The plot and action that take place in a story can be thought of as one level, while the symbolism of certain aspects of the writing act on another level to enhance the meaning of the story.

- DISCUSSION**
- What is the meaning of symbolism? Ask for some examples from students' experiences.
  - Give some examples of symbolism in literature (examples: a storm can forebode a tragedy, a river may symbolize the flow of life.)
  - What symbolism can they identify from *My Impractical Life* ?
  - What do the walls represent in this story? Where did the walls come from? What did it mean when Trent made the walls disappear? What is the message or theme of the play?
  - What does the symbol of the speeding sports car suggest? (It symbolizes Trent traveling through his life and career, and though he feels empowered, he still makes choices that can be important or even risky)
  - What is the symbol of the mountain climb about? (The obstacles that Trent must overcome to find his way in life.)
  - What does the dancing at the end symbolize? (Getting the most out of life.)
  - What circumstances or individuals have been obstacles in your life? Have you been able to overcome them? Did anything in the play remind you of your own life?

**ACTIVITY** Answer the questions about the symbolism of the wall using Student Activity Sheet #5.

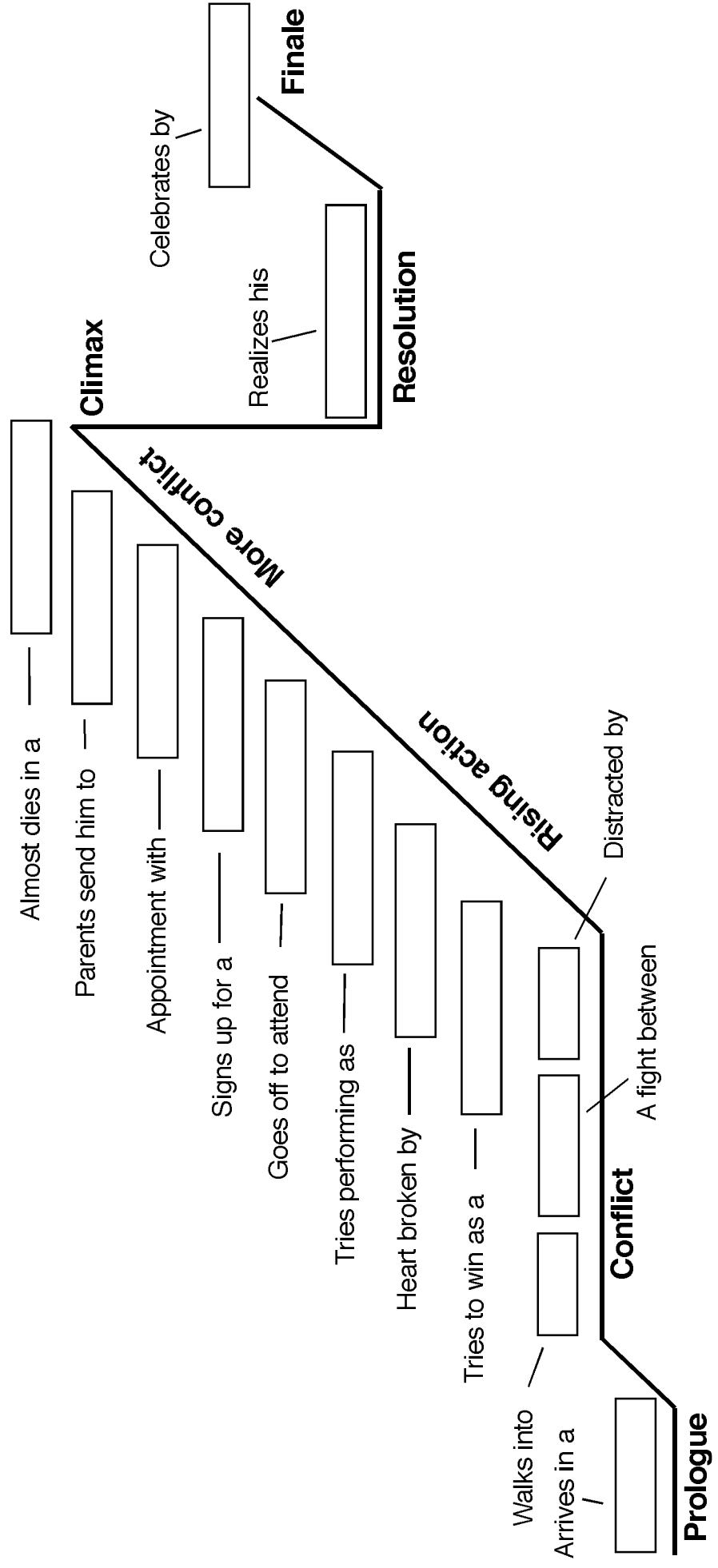
## STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEET #1: COMPARISON CHART

Create a comparison chart for yourself and Trent in the play:

- Compare or contrast situations he faced with your own.
- Identify emotions or pressures which influenced Trent. What are your own?
- What inner conflicts was Trent dealing with? Are there conflicts that you experience?
- Who could support you around your dreams?
- What actions could you take to realize your dreams?
- What might the consequences of those actions be?

TOPIC	TRENT	ME
Situations faced		
Emotions		
Outside pressures		
Inner conflicts		
Who is supportive		
Actions to take		
Consequences		

STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEET #2: STORY STRUCTURE/ PLOT DIAGRAM



**DIRECTIONS:**  
 Fill in the blocks with the events below in the order in which they occur in the play:

Climb and fall	Rock Star	Dream girl
Dancing on TV	Sports Car	TV, etc.
Mime class	Head/Heart	Psychiatrist
Boot camp	Lessons learned	Sports hero
Walls	College	

### STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEET #3: FORMS OF HUMOUR

FORM OF HUMOUR	DEFINITION	FILL IN A SCENE IN THE PLAY THAT USES THE CORRESPONDING FORM OF HUMOUR
Slapstick	Physical comedy which usually involves the appearance of injury, like simulated fighting or the illusion of tripping.	The Head/ Heart fight
Illusion	Using the body in unexpected ways. Mime is an example of physical illusion. We do not expect to see a performer lifted off the stage by an invisible balloon, and the surprise of seeing this illusion makes us laugh.	
Sound effects	A performer's ability to create the sound of something unexpected is surprising and delightful to an audience, and is often used to create humour.	
Satire	The use of humour, including irony, sarcasm, and parody to make fun of the foolishness of someone or something. It is a higher form of humor than broader, baser forms like slapstick, sound effects or illusion in that it is language based and has an element of commentary.	
Irony	An occurrence, circumstance or outcome that is the opposite of what one might expect to occur. <i>It is ironic that after dressing so nicely for the cruise that I fell into the water and ruined my clothing.</i>	
Parody	An exaggerated imitation or mockery of someone's words or actions with the intention of making fun. <i>She walked around with her nose in the air in a parody of the queen.</i>	
Sarcasm	The use of ironic words (normally meaning the opposite of the intended message) for the purpose of criticizing someone or some thing. <i>"You have such fine table manners," he said sarcastically to a child who was throwing food across the dinner table.</i>	<i>Note: there is no sarcasm used in this play, but we include it here because it is a familiar form of satire and is a close cousin to irony.</i>



STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEET #4: THEATRICAL DEVICE AND MOOD

Column 1) Fill in the **theatrical device** used in the scene from one of the following. Some devices are used multiple times. Some scenes use more than one device:

**Monologue, Illusion, Puppet, Music, Sound effects, Illusion of two characters**

Column 2) Fill in the **mood of the scene** from one of the following examples, or suggest your own. Some scenes have more than one mood:

**Frantic, Exasperating, Satirical, Heroic, Exciting, Triumphant, Tense, Celebratory, Combative, Schmaltzy, Romantic, Satirical, Touching, Dramatic, Scary, Thoughtful**

Column 3) Jot down any thoughts, feelings or questions that came up for you during some of the scenes

SCENE	1) THEATRICAL DEVICE	2) MOOD OF THE SCENE	3) I FELT, I THOUGHT, I WONDERED...
Sports Car	<i>Sound effects</i>	<i>Funny, intriguing</i>	<i>If Trent actually got rich doing mime</i>
Walking into Walls			
Head vs. Heart			
TV, etc			
Sports Hero			
Dream Girl			
Rock Star			
Psychiatrist			
Mtn. Climb and Fall			
So you think...dance?			

