

2022 – 2023



*An American Tail*

# EDUCATOR GUIDE

children's  
theatre  
company



**May 2 - June 15, 2023**

*A Children's Theatre Company Commissioned World Premiere  
Production in association with Universal Theatrical Group*

An army of cats forces young Fievel Mousekewitz and his family to escape from Russia by boat. When a storm at sea separates them, Fievel arrives alone in the vast city of New York. In this riveting new musical based on the beloved animated film, the steadfastly optimistic Fievel makes his way as a new immigrant, encountering friends and foes (including a few scene-stealing cockroaches!). Despite everything stacked against him, Fievel clings to his dreams of a better life and reuniting with his family. Are they *Somewhere Out There*?

book and lyrics by **ITAMAR MOSES**

music and lyrics by **MICHAEL MAHLER** and **ALAN SCHMUCKLER**

BASED ON THE **UNIVERSAL PICTURES/AMBIN ENTERTAINMENT** ANIMATED FILM

Directed by **TAIBI MAGAR**



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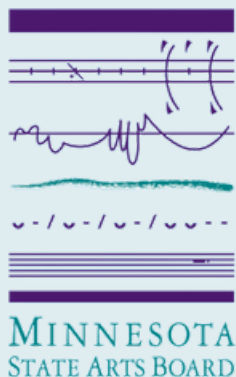
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# Immigration in *An American Tail*



The Mousekewitz family travels to the United States in the 1880s. At that time, large numbers of immigrants were arriving from all over Europe, leaving behind political instability, economic distress, and religious persecution. This huge influx of immigrants was later called the "Great Wave."

27 million immigrants arrived in the United States during the Great Wave, including 2 million Jews, like the Mousekewitz family.

## Atlantic Crossing

Many immigrants arrived on steamships after crossing the Atlantic Ocean. The Mousekewitz family traveled in the steerage, the part of a ship in which passengers with the cheapest tickets traveled. The steerage was crowded and journeys lasted about 5-6 days.



## Arrival in the United States

After arriving in the United States, many immigrants faced a number of challenges, including finding housing and work. Many groups decided to live and work near others from their home countries. Some blocks or areas of town were entirely made up of people from the same country. Some of these neighborhoods gained nicknames like "Chinatown" or "Little Italy."

To survive and thrive in the rough streets of New York, Fievel is encouraged to blend in or assimilate to the American culture by changing his clothes and even his name. Fievel adopts the name Philly Moss to avoid being discriminated against as an immigrant.

## Building America

Even though life was hard, most immigrants did not return to their home countries. Many immigrants worked to build subways, skyscrapers, roads, and more, eventually bargaining for better wages and working conditions. These improvements helped them on their way to becoming America's middle class.



# Springboard

Ideas of what to talk about, write about, or explore while connecting *An American Tail* to your classroom curriculum



Write a review of the performance or a letter to the actors.

Rewrite or retell the story from the perspective of Bridget. How does the story change?

What emotions did you feel during the play?

Research other immigration stories throughout the decades and compare their story to Fievel's.

Why do you think the Mousekewitz family immigrated to America? What do you think motivates people today to immigrate to America?

Imagine Fievel and his family immigrated to your town. How would you make them feel welcome? Make them a guidebook of all the great things about your community.

Write a diary entry from the perspective of one of the mice coming to America for the first time.



# ***Class Act: Actor's Tools***

Actors use many tools to help them tell a story – three we focus on at CTC are body, voice, and imagination.

Explain that projecting means using a loud voice and enunciating means speaking clearly. Have students practice projecting and enunciating by saying the title of the play, *An American Tail*, as a group, and then individually.

Brainstorm emotions that actors might portray. Try saying, “*An American Tail*” using those emotions. Students will naturally begin to use their body to portray the emotion as they say the line. Brainstorm how your body looks or feels different when you are feeling these emotions. Allow a few students to showcase their work as a solo.

# ***Class Act: Take a Stand***

**Objective:** This activity encourages students to examine their stance on a topic. This activity works best in an open area.

**Directions:** Create a line through the center of the space using either painter's tape or other distinguishers. One side of the line represents “agree” and the other side of the line represents “disagree.” However, the room represents a spectrum with the middle representing neutral.

Pose a question to the group and ask them to stand on the point in the agree-disagree spectrum that describes their feelings. After everyone has found their spot, ask select students why they stood where they did. Encourage students to be persuaded by their peers- they can move to different points as their outlook shifts or perspective changes. Spend time unpacking each question and responses as needed.

Below are a few prompts to get you started. We encourage starting with questions with low stakes and moving to higher stakes as students become comfortable with the activity. Spend time unpacking after the activity concludes.

**Example prompts:**

- Pizza is the best food ever created.
- I get excited when I'm traveling to a new place.
- America is the best country in the world.
- Immigration has improved in the United States.
- I would rather pay more for a product in order to ensure that the workers who made it were being treated fairly.



## ***Class Act: Narrative Picture***

**Objective:** This activity challenges students to compare and contrast characters, infer meaning in a picture, and practice creative problem solving skills. Students will use their imagination to create imagined situations within a sequence of events.

**Directions:** Show the class one historical photo of immigration such as the examples below. Give students an opportunity to share with the class what they observe about this picture.

Divide students into small groups and have them re-create the picture with their bodies. Once all the students are frozen in the scene, allow each to make up a line of dialogue their character/object would say. Allow each student in the scene to say what their character/object is thinking in the scene. Reflect on how what we say and what we think are different. How do you decide what to say out loud and what to keep to yourself?

Dismiss students back to their small groups to brainstorm what might have happened right before this photo was taken. Create a tableau of this situation.

As a large group, analyze the conflict of this scene and brainstorm how this conflict might be solved. Dismiss students back to their small group to create a tableau of a potential solution to the conflict. Allow each group to showcase all three tableaux (beginning, middle, and end) in front of the class.

Ask the audience to make observations about the created scenes. How was the conflict solved?



# ***Class Act: Character Interview***

**Objective:** In this activity, students will use their imagination to invent backgrounds, justify actions, and answer questions from a character's perspective. Students will generate questions to better understand a variety of characters and build empathy. Students will offer advice and ideas to help the characters.

**Directions:** Place a chair at the front of the room. Ask for a volunteer to come to the front of the class and pretend to be Fievel.

The rest of the students will play the role of news reporters who are interviewing Fievel for the local newspaper. The teacher can model by asking Fievel a few questions, then invite the class of reporters to ask questions.

Sample questions

- What made you excited about moving to America?
- What did you miss about your home country?
- How did it feel to be separated from your family?

After interviewing Fievel, do the same activity for other characters in the story such as Bridget, Tanya, Henri, and Warren T. Rat.

# ***Team Builders: Hopes & Fears***

**Objective:** This activity allows students to voice their hopes and fears for the future while comparing them with their classmates. This activity aims to give perspective and commonality.

**Directions:** Instruct all students to put their heads down and close their eyes. Sit for a moment in the silence, then instruct students to begin to popcorn out their hopes and dreams for the future. Once the ideas begin to die down, instruct students to think about similarities and differences in those statements.

After the students have had enough time to think silently, instruct them to popcorn out their fears for the future. Advise students that these statements should be ones they are comfortable sharing with the class. Again, give students a moment to think about the similarities and differences.

Invite students to slowly open their eyes. Reflect as a group about similarities and differences they heard with the hopes and dreams. How did they feel when they were hearing the hopes and dreams of their classmates? Reflect on the similarities and differences they heard in the fears for the future. How did they feel while hearing the fears of their classmates?



# Team Builder: I Dream Of...

**Objective:** This activity allows students to explore their dreams for the future through physicality and gesture. Students will make observations and infer meaning.

**Directions:** Gather students in a circle. One at a time, each student will step forward and say “Hello, my name is (insert name here), and for my future, I dream of..”. They will then show their dream for the future through gesture or mime. Allow each student to have a turn showcasing their dream.

When everyone has had a turn, reflect with students about what they observed. What were the similarities they saw? Did any gestures stand out? What emotions did they feel while watching these gestures?

## Write It Out: Hero's Journey

**Objective:** This activity will challenge students to create a plot of their own making and explore the hero's journey. This works well as a follow up activity to the worksheet on pages 12-13.

**Directions:** Select a few existing hero's journey stories such as *The Hobbit* or *The Wizard of Oz* and show them to the class. Brainstorm as a group the similarities and differences between each. What are the common characteristics of hero's journey stories?

Collect two paper bags and assign a prompt from the table below for each bag. For example, you might choose to have a “common objects” bag and a “settings” bag. Write examples of these things on slips of paper and place them in the matching bag. Write enough slips to have one for each student in each bag.

Paper Bag Prompts	
Common Objects	Emotions
Traits	Physical Actions
Settings	Characters

Allow each student to choose one prompt from each bag and challenge them to write an original hero's journey story about those things using the template on pages 1.



## Write it Out: Where I'm From

**Objective:** This activity uses the poem "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon to build community and explore belonging. Students will practice writing skills by creating their own versions of the poem.

**Directions:** Gather students in a circle. One student begins by standing in the center of the circle and saying "Where I'm from everyone eats..." and completing the sentence. If that statement rings true for anyone in the circle, that person also takes a step into the circle. If they feel it is very true for them, they

### "Where I'm From" By George Ella Lyon

I am from clothespins,  
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride.  
I am from the dirt under the back porch.  
(Black, glistening,  
it tasted like beets.)

I am from the forsythia bush  
the Dutch elm  
whose long-gone limbs I remember  
as if they were my own.

I'm from fudge and eyeglasses,  
from Imogene and Alafair.

I'm from the know-it-alls  
and the pass-it-ons,  
from Perk up! and Pipe down!

I'm from He restoreth my soul  
with a cottonball lamb  
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,  
fried corn and strong coffee.

From the finger my grandfather lost  
to the auger,  
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.

Under my bed was a dress box  
spilling old pictures,  
a sift of lost faces  
to drift beneath my dreams.

I am from those moments--  
snapped before I budded --  
leaf-fall from the family tree.

step farther into the circle than if it is only somewhat true for them. Assure students that they only need to share statements that they are comfortable sharing and that they get to decide if something is true for them.

After everyone has a chance to observe the commonalities, everyone re-joins the circle and another student has a turn being the person in the center.

Allow everyone to have a chance to complete the prompt then give them another prompt.

Example Prompts:

- Where I'm from everyone says...
- Where I'm from everyone knows...
- Where I'm from everyone believes in...
- Where I'm from everyone smells like...
- Where I'm from everyone feels...

Ask students to return to their seats and reflect on the activity as a group. How did they feel? Were there any moments that surprised them? What connections did you make with classmates?

Read or listen to the poem "Where I'm From" by George Ella Lyon. Using the poem and activity as inspiration, students can write their own version of "Where I'm From." Students can either free write or use the template available below:

### Poem Template

Ask for volunteers to showcase their poems for the class.

# Write It Out: Role on the Wall

**Objective:** This activity allows students to brainstorm external and internal factors for characters and create deeper, more empathetic understanding of character motivations. Students will consider different characters' point of view.

**Directions:** Draw an outline of a person on the board. Choose a character from the play such as Fievel, Mama, or Tony for your shape to represent. Brainstorm all the external things that impact the character (other characters, incidents we see and those we hear about, societal pressures, etc.) and write those around the outside of the figure. Next, fill the inside of the character with ideas of how the character feels about all the things on the outside.

Dismiss students to work individually on the activity focusing on a different character. Retell or rewrite the story of *An American Tail* from the perspective of that character. How does that change the story? Did this activity change your opinion of that character? Have you ever experienced similar feelings or events?

# Research It: World Map

**Objective:** This activity challenges students to think about countries and gain awareness of the world around them. This activity works best in a large open space such as a gymnasium, classroom with desks to the side, or outside.

**Directions:** Assign each student a country to research. Give them time on a computer or in a library to learn as much as they can about that country. Students should color the flag of that country.

Tell the students that we are going to make a map of the world in this open area using our bodies. Decide collectively where the United States should be located on this map. Ask students to stand where the country they researched would be located on your map and place the flag of their country at their feet. As the teacher, take a look at the space and see if any adjustments need to be made. Instead of giving students the answers, challenge them to take a second look at problem areas ("Let's take a second look at Europe. Can anyone help?").

Once your map is established, ask students to move to a country based on your prompts. Ask students to step to a country that they know the capitol of. After students have chosen a country, you can quiz them to see if they are correct. Additional sample prompts are:

- Walk to a country where your favorite food originated.
- Walk to a country with a tropical climate.
- Walk to a country that your ancestors are from.
- Walk to the country where you were born.

If students are comfortable, you can ask them to identify for the class where they chose and why they chose that location.

# Hero's Journey

Fievel's journey to find his family follows the Hero's Journey template. The Hero's Journey is common in stories that involve a hero who goes on an adventure, wins a victory, and returns home transformed. Map Fievel's journey through each of the stages.

Hero's Journey	Definition	<i>An American Tail</i> Outline
Ordinary World	Where the hero exists before the story begins.	
Call to Adventure	Something disrupts the hero's ordinary world and presents a challenge or quest.	
Refusal of the call	The hero refuses to accept the challenge due to fear, uncertainty, etc.	
Meeting the Mentor	Hero gets guidance from a mentor figure who gives them something they need.	
Crossing the First Threshold	The hero begins their quest.	
Tests, Allies, and Enemies	The hero is confronted with a difficult series of obstacles that test their skills.	

Photo credit: Tom Loring (April 2015)

Hero's Journey	Definition	<i>An American Tail Outline</i>
The Approach	At the brink of their final obstacle, the hero makes preparations and finds the courage to continue.	
Supreme Ordeal	The major test or crisis the hero must face.	
Seizing the Sword	After defeating the enemy and surviving the journey, the hero is offered a reward.	
The Road Back	The moment before the hero commits to the final journey.	
Resurrection	The hero must complete a final test and apply what they have learned.	
Return with Elixir	Hero returns home to the Ordinary World but has grown and changed as a person.	

What other stories follow the Hero's Journey template?

# Corkboard Conversations

Use the sticky notes below to think critically about *An American Tail*

Three adjectives that describe this play are...

- 1
- 2
- 3

This play made me feel...

This play made me think about...

A status I would post on my social media after seeing this show is...

A question I still have is...

This play taught me...



My Rating of *An American Tail* at Children's Theatre Company

# FURTHER RESOURCES

## More About Immigration

American Tail and Themes of Immigration and Racism

[Learn More](#)

An Educator's Guide to the Immigration Debate

[Read More](#)

Poems about Immigration

[Explore](#)

Interactive Immigration Timeline

[Explore](#)

"Atlantic Crossings" from the National Museum of American History

[Learn More](#)

Junior Scholastic Immigration Teaching Kits

[Resources](#)

19th Century Tenements in New York

[Read More](#)

Oxidation & the Statue of Liberty Science Lesson

[Explore](#)

## More About *An American Tail*

Teaching With Movies | American Tail Guide

[Explore](#)

Director Don Bluth on American Tail's Themes

[Learn More](#)

Animating with Don Bluth

[Watch](#)

An American Tail Reflection Questions

[Explore](#)

Mail Letters to:

**Children's Theatre Company**  
2400 Third Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55404

Submit Student Questions at:

[www.childrenstheatre.org/offbookquestions](http://www.childrenstheatre.org/offbookquestions)

Check out more activities on:



Questions? Email:

[schools@childrenstheatre.org](mailto:schools@childrenstheatre.org)

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