

ExxonMobil

DISCOVERY
SERIES



SWITCHEROO
AT THE HOUSTON ZOO



HOUSTON
CONTEMPORARY
DANCE COMPANY

THE
HOBBY
CENTER
FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS

2026-2027 Season
5th Grade Curriculum Guide

Table of Contents

3. About the Performance

Performance synopsis and information, about the arts organization and writer. On the following page, learn more about the animals in the show and The Houston Zoo

6. Theater Etiquette

Audience Guidelines

5. The Hobby Center

Learn more about The Hobby Center for the Performing Arts and the theater spaces that hold our show series!

7. Vocabulary

Words and definitions from the performance

11. Pre-show Activities

Discussion, activities, and printable worksheets for pre-show engagement

12. TEKS/STAAR Alignment

Alignment to 5th grade standards

13. Classroom Connections

Core curriculum alignment

14. Post-Show Activities

Extended learning through discussion, activities, and career exploration

16. Post-Show Worksheets

Extended learning through printable post-show worksheets

18. Resources

Recommendations for 5th graders and teachers

About the Performance

Switcheroo at the Houston Zoo

Switcheroo at the Houston Zoo! is a magical, interactive dance theater production that brings the audience along to Houston's incredible zoo for a day of wonder and exploration. Join two siblings and their frazzled parent as they learn to stop fighting and reconnect, with help from the resilient Houston toads, the curious red pandas, the creative Asian elephants, and the playful Humboldt penguins.

Houston Contemporary Dance Company's core values of creativity, growth, curiosity, and pluralism are deeply aligned with the buoyant story writer Elizabeth A. M. Keel has crafted. *Switcheroo at the Houston Zoo!* portrays a family in dire need of unity. They are struggling with in-fighting, frustration, isolation, and a skewed work-life balance. It is only by entering into community that they can rescue themselves. The wise, diverse population of animals, with the help of their friendly zookeeper, offer the young humans reminders that everyone deserves to be shown kindness, patience, and grace. Sound and visual design contributed by Bend Productions.

Written by Elizabeth A.M. Keel

Elizabeth A. M. Keel is an award-winning Houston playwright, director, actress, and teaching artist whose original plays have been produced, commissioned, and developed by theaters across Houston and beyond. She is passionate about creating imaginative stories for young audiences that celebrate curiosity, creativity, and community through the performing arts. Upcoming projects can be found at www.elizabethamkeel.com.



Houston Contemporary Dance Company (HCDC)

Houston Contemporary aims to lead and innovate performing arts in Houston by drawing upon the director's long tradition of inclusiveness and diversity within all facets of the organization.

Houston Contemporary Dance Company sets itself apart by employing high caliber performing and choreographic artists from across the country. In setting high technical and artistic standards, Houston Contemporary Dance Company is currently the only contemporary repertory company to provide Houston audiences with opportunities to view works created by some of America's most exciting dancemakers that speak to and are representative of the full spectrum of Houston's diverse populace, while supporting talented Texas based artists as well.

The Houston Zoo

Meet the Stars of Switcheroo



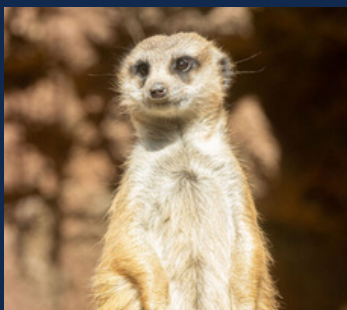
Houston Toad -

A critically endangered amphibian found only in Texas that the Houston Zoo helps protect through conservation and breeding programs.



Asian Elephant -

Highly intelligent animals known for their strong family bonds, excellent memories, and love of creativity and play.



Meerkat -

Social animals from southern Africa that live in groups, work together, and take turns watching for danger.



Humboldt Penguin - Expert swimmers from the coasts of Peru and Chile that use teamwork and speed to survive.

photos provided
by The Houston Zoo



The Houston Zoo is home to more than 6,000 animals representing hundreds of species from around the world. Beyond caring for animals, the Zoo works to protect wildlife through conservation, education, research, and partnerships that help endangered species both in Houston and across the globe. The Zoo's mission, "See Them. Save Them." encourages every visitor to discover how they can help protect animals and their habitats.

Live Zoo Webcam



[Click or Scan](#)
[to watch the](#)
[LIVE camera](#)
[feed of](#)
[animals](#)
[at The](#)
[Houston Zoo!](#)



About the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts

The Hobby Center for the Performing Arts opened to the public in 2002 in downtown Houston, at the edge of the city's renowned Theater District. The district is home to several major performing arts organizations, including Houston Grand Opera, Houston Ballet, Houston Symphony, Performing Arts Houston, Theatre Under The Stars, DaCamera, and Alley Theatre. Located beside Tranquility Park and one block from Houston City Hall, the Hobby Center was named in honor of former Texas lieutenant governor and Houston businessman William P. Hobby Jr. after his family foundation made a significant contribution to the project. The Hobby Center was built on the site formerly occupied by the Houston Music Hall and Sam Houston Coliseum, both of which were demolished in 1998. Today, the Hobby Center includes three performance spaces designed specifically for theater, music, and live performance experiences:

- **Sarofim Hall** is a 2,650-seat proscenium theater designed to accommodate large-scale touring Broadway productions and major live performances. Resident companies include Theatre Under The Stars and Broadway Across America. The hall's design combines grandeur with theatrical elegance. Golden latticework frames the space, while multi-storied gold-leaf columns stand in contrast to deep midnight-blue walls. Overhead, the Joe and Lee Jamail Celestial Dome Ceiling features twinkling fiber-optic stars arranged to mirror the Texas night sky.
- **Zilkha Hall** is an intimate 500-seat "jewel-box" theater, a term used to describe smaller performance spaces designed with rich detail, warmth, and close audience connection. Home to many of Houston's local arts organizations, the hall features excellent acoustics, deep-rose tones, and walnut wood accents across two seating levels.
- **The Founders Club** is an intimate live music venue with cabaret-style seating. Guests may purchase tables of four or be seated with others, creating a social and relaxed atmosphere. The series features both local performers and nationally recognized artists in a format not commonly found in Houston. Concerts span a variety of genres, including Broadway songbook, jazz, and world music.

ExxonMobil DISCOVERY SERIES

The ExxonMobil Discovery Series is the Hobby Center's flagship education program, welcoming 5th grade students from across Houston to experience live performances by local and touring artists. Aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the series brings dance, music, and theater to life in ways that connect directly to what students are learning in the classroom. Every performance is free—including transportation—and includes curriculum materials and artist Q&As that deepen the experience.

For the 2026-27 school year, the Hobby Center is thrilled to be partnering with 22+ school districts to serve nearly 50,000 5th graders.

Special thanks to lead underwriter ExxonMobil and generous supporters: Cullen Trust for the Performing Arts, Elkins Foundation, George and Mary Josephine Hamman Foundation, Albert and Ethel Herzstein Charitable Foundation, Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, The John M. O'Quinn Foundation, Texas Commission on the Arts, H-E-B, Vivian L. Smith Foundation, and Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion

Theater Etiquette

Before you come to the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, Please take some time to talk with your students about what to expect. Going to a live performance is a group experience unlike any other, and many students are more familiar with going to the movies or sporting events. Please help them prepare for what they'll see and how they should act.

Other things to keep in mind: Make sure your students use the restroom before they leave school or at the theater before the show. If you get up during the performance, you may miss the best part! The performance runs approximately one hour long with no intermission. In entering or exiting the theater, safety is the primary concern. Please follow instructions from the house managers and ushers in taking your seats.

Going to a performance is different than going to a movie:

- This production is performed live. The performers can see, hear and react to the audience!
- Audience members can show the performers when they appreciate their performance! If something is funny, you can laugh! If the performers are doing a great job, then you can clap!
- Sometimes, the performers will ask you to participate by singing or clapping; please do not talk unless the performers ask you to!
- At the end of the show, the performers will bow. This is called a curtain call. If you really loved the show, you can give them a standing ovation to show that you appreciate their hard work!
- School clothes are appropriate, but some people like to dress up to go to the theater. Just make sure you are comfortable.

Going to a performance is the same as going to a movie:

- The lights dim before the performance begins and the theater stays dark during the show.
- Audience members are expected to stay quiet in their seats during the performance.
- Audience members may NOT take any pictures or video during the performance. (This is distracting to the performers and other audience members and this show contains copyrighted artistic material.)
- All cell phones and other electronic devices should be powered OFF or put on SILENT as soon as you enter the theater.

VISIT RESTROOM BEFORE - NOT DURING.

ARRIVE EARLY.

QUIET & SEATED DURING SHOW.

NO PHOTOS OR VIDEOS DURING SHOW.

PHONES OFF/SILENCED.

RESPECT THE SPACE & OTHERS.

LISTEN & ENGAGE.

APPLAUD APPROPRIATELY.

Vocabulary

- **Adaptation** - A special body part or behavior that helps a plant or animal survive in its environment.
- **Amphibian** - A cold-blooded animal, such as a frog or toad, that lives part of its life in water and part on land.
- **Biodiversity** - The variety of living plants, animals, and other organisms that share an ecosystem.
- **Biome** - A large geographic region with a specific climate, plants, and animals that work together as an ecosystem.
- **Biomimicry** - Designing products or solving problems by studying ideas found in nature, such as animals or plants.
- **Choreography** - The planned sequence of dance movements created to tell a story or express an idea.
- **Conservation Zoo** - A zoo that not only cares for animals but also helps protect endangered species through breeding programs, scientific research, education, and habitat protection.
- **Empathy** - The ability to understand and care about another person's or animal's feelings and experiences.
- **Endangered** - Describes a species that is at serious risk of becoming extinct.
- **Enrichment** - Activities, toys, or challenges that keep zoo animals mentally and physically active while encouraging natural behaviors.
- **Habitat** - The natural environment where a plant or animal lives and finds food, water, and shelter.
- **Herpetology** - The scientific study of reptiles and amphibians.
- **Matriarch** - The female leader of an animal family or herd, such as an elephant herd.
- **Narrator** - A person or voice that tells the story and helps the audience understand what is happening.
- **Omnivore** - An animal that eats both plants and other animals.
- **Projection** - Images, videos, or animations displayed on a screen or backdrop to help tell a story during a performance.
- **Species** - A group of living things that share similar characteristics and can reproduce with one another.
- **Veterinarian** - A doctor who cares for the health and well-being of animals.
- **Zookeeper** - A trained professional who provides daily care for zoo animals, including feeding, enrichment, habitat maintenance, and conservation.

PRE-SHOW

DISCUSSION

Nature Inspires Movement

- How do different animals move, and what makes each movement unique?
- Why might dancers study the movements of animals before creating a performance?
- Which animal are you most excited to learn about, and why?

Stories Without Words

- How can dancers tell a story without speaking?
- What kinds of emotions can movement, music, or facial expressions communicate?
- What clues do you think you'll use to understand the story during the performance?

Learning From Animals

- What are some things humans can learn from observing animals?
- How can working together help families, classmates, or communities solve problems?
- Why is it important to protect animals and the places where they live?



All performance photos by Claire McAdams

PRE-SHOW

ACTIVITIES

Animal Movement

Observe how different animals move by watching short videos or looking at pictures of the Houston toad, Meerkat, Asian elephant, and Humboldt penguin. Then recreate each animal's movements using your body and discuss which adaptations help each animal survive.

Design a Habitat

Choose one of the animals featured in *Switcheroo at the Houston Zoo!* Draw or build its habitat, labeling the food, water, shelter, and other features it needs to survive. Share how your habitat helps keep the animal healthy and safe.

Invent Like Nature

Many inventions are inspired by nature, a concept called biomimicry. Think about one animal from the show and imagine an invention inspired by one of its unique adaptations. Draw your idea and explain how it could help people solve a real-world problem.

Career Spotlight: Zoo/Stage

Switcheroo at the Houston Zoo! brings together experts from science and the arts. Research one career involved in creating the performance or caring for animals, such as a veterinarian, zookeeper, wildlife biologist, choreographer, costume designer, or lighting designer. Create a short presentation explaining what that person does and how they contributed to bringing animals or stories to life.



WHO MAKES THE ZOO COME TO LIFE?

Name: _____

Date: _____



1. MATCH THE CAREERS

Draw a line to match each career with its description.

- | | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|---|
| Veterinarian | ☐ | ☐ Creates the dance movements performers learn. |
| Zookeeper | ☐ | ☐ Writes the story for the performance. |
| Wildlife Biologist | ☐ | ☐ Cares for animals and keeps them healthy. |
| Choreographer | ☐ | ☐ Helps care for animals every day and creates enrichment activities. |
| Dancer | ☐ | ☐ Performs the movements that tell the story. |
| Costume Designer | ☐ | ☐ Creates music that helps set the mood. |
| Projection Designer | ☐ | ☐ Designs clothing and costumes for performers. |
| Playwright | ☐ | ☐ Uses images and videos to create the world on stage. |
| Composer | ☐ | ☐ Studies animals and helps protect wildlife. |
| Stage Manager | ☐ | ☐ Helps everything backstage run smoothly during the performance. |



2. WHICH CAREER FITS YOU?

Circle the career that sounds most interesting.

Veterinarian • Zookeeper • Wildlife Biologist • Choreographer • Dancer
Costume Designer • Playwright • Composer • Projection Designer • Stage Manager

I would enjoy this career because...



3. DESIGN A CAREER

Invent a career that combines animals, science, and the arts.

Career name: _____

What would this person do?

What education or training would they need?

What would this person's salary be and why?



FIFTH GRADE

TEKS Alignment

ELAR & READING- §110.7

TEKS: 5.6(E), 5.7(E), 5.9(E)

Student Learning Connection:

Students interpret character relationships, theme, and plot through dance, narration, and music, making inferences about emotions, conflict, and resolution while connecting ideas across literary and informational texts.

Science -§112.16

TEKS: 5.6(A), 5.6(B), 5.13(A)

Student Learning Connection:

Students investigate how animal structures, behaviors, and adaptations help organisms survive in their environments while exploring habitats, biodiversity, and the importance of protecting endangered species.

Mathematics - §111.7

TEKS: 5.1(A), 5.1(E), 5.5(A)

Student Learning Connection:

Students analyze real-world information about zoo animals by organizing, comparing, and interpreting numerical data related to animal populations, habitats, and conservation efforts while solving multi-step problems.

Social Studies - §113.16

TEKS: 5.9(A), 5.14(A), 5.22(A)

Student Learning Connection:

Students examine how people, organizations, and communities work together to protect natural resources, preserve wildlife, and improve the quality of life through conservation and environmental stewardship.

Health - §115.17

TEKS: 5.1 (B), 5.3(A), 5.4(A)

Student Learning Connection:

Students explore empathy, healthy communication, cooperation, and responsible decision-making as they examine how families, friends, and communities build positive relationships and resolve conflicts.

Fine Arts -§117.114

TEKS:(a1), (a2), (a3)

Student Learning Connection:

Students analyze how choreography, music, expression, and theatrical design communicate characters, scientific concepts, and stories without relying primarily on spoken dialogue.

FIFTH GRADE

STAAR Alignment



RLA

STAAR Reporting Category:

*Reading Comprehension,
Vocabulary, Author's Craft,
Composition, Inquiry & Research*

Student Learning Connection

Analyze how dance, narration, music, and movement work together to tell a story. Make inferences about characters, theme, conflict, and resolution while connecting the performance to informational texts about animals, habitats, and conservation.

Mathematics

STAAR Reporting Category:

*Pattern, Relationships, Data
Analysis, and Mathematical
Processes*

Student Learning Connection

Interpret graphs, charts, and numerical data related to zoo animals, endangered species, and conservation efforts. Apply mathematical reasoning to compare animal populations, habitats, and real-world data while solving multi-step problems.

Science

STAAR Reporting Category:

Organisms and Environments

Student Learning Connection

Investigate how animal adaptations, habitats, and behaviors help organisms survive. Explore biodiversity, endangered species, food webs, and the important role accredited zoos play in protecting wildlife.

FIFTH GRADE

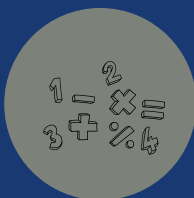
Curriculum Connections



English Language Arts

In The Classroom

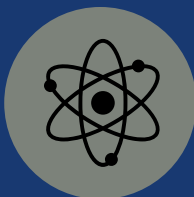
Explore how stories can be told through movement, music, narration, and visual expression. Students analyze characters, theme, and conflict while making connections between literary texts and informational texts about animals, habitats, and conservation.



Mathematics

In The Classroom

Apply data analysis and mathematical reasoning by exploring information about zoo animals, endangered species, habitats, and conservation efforts. Students interpret graphs, compare populations, and solve real-world problems using authentic wildlife data.



Science

In The Classroom

Investigate how animal adaptations, habitats, and behaviors help living organisms survive. Students explore biodiversity, endangered species, ecosystems, and the important role accredited zoos play in protecting wildlife through research, education, and habitat restoration.



Social Studies

In The Classroom

Discover how people, organizations, and communities work together to protect natural resources and wildlife. Students examine the role of the Houston Zoo in conservation, learn about local and global environmental stewardship, and explore how individual actions can positively impact the world around them.



Health / SEL

In The Classroom

Reflect on empathy, patience, cooperation, and healthy communication through the relationships portrayed in the performance. Students discuss how understanding others' perspectives, resolving conflicts, and working together strengthen families, friendships, and communities.

Discussion



Lessons From Animals

- What important lesson did each animal teach Ollie and Ernie?
- Which animal's message do you think was the most meaningful? Why?
- If you could add another animal to the story, what lesson would it teach?

Dance Tells the Story

- How did the dancers help you understand the characters without relying on spoken dialogue?
- Which movement, costume, or projection helped you understand the story the most?
- How did each animal move differently, and what did those movements reveal about its personality or adaptations?



Conservation



- What did you learn about the Houston Zoo's role in protecting endangered animals?
- Why is it important to protect habitats and the animals that live there?
- What is one action you can take to help care for wildlife or the environment in your own community?

Growing Together

- How did Ollie, Ernie, and their parent change by the end of the performance?
- What role did patience, empathy, and teamwork play in solving their problems?
- How can spending time together and listening to one another strengthen families and friendships?



POST-SHOW Activities

Reflective Writing

- **A New Animal Adventure**

Imagine Ollie and Ernie return to the Houston Zoo for another magical adventure. Choose a different animal that could teach them a new life lesson. Write a short story describing the animal, its habitat, the lesson it shares, and how the siblings change by the end.



STEAM Design Challenge

- **Inspired by Nature**

Many inventions are inspired by animals. Choose one animal from *Switcheroo at the Houston Zoo!* and design an invention based on one of its adaptations. Draw your invention, label its features, and explain how it could solve a real-world problem.

Create & Design

- **Build an Enrichment Activity**

Zoo animals need enrichment to stay healthy and active. Design an enrichment activity for one of the animals featured in the performance. Draw your idea and explain how it encourages natural behaviors, exercise, or problem-solving.



Community Connections

- **Become a Wildlife Steward**

Choose one local animal or habitat in your community that needs protection. Create a poster, brochure, or public service announcement encouraging others to help protect wildlife through simple everyday actions.

Career Spotlight

- **Help Wanted**

Create a "Help Wanted" poster for a career such as a zookeeper, veterinarian, choreographer, or costume designer. Describe the job responsibilities, required skills, and why the role is important.



POST-SHOW

PRINTABLE ACTIVITY

Worksheet - Career Pathway Challenge

Name: _____

Date: _____

Complete the chart.

Career	What They Contribute
Playwright	
Choreographer	
Dancer	
Zookeeper	
Veterinarian	
Projection Designer	
Costume Designer	
Composer	

Then answer:

Which career surprised you the most after watching the performance? Why?



PRINTABLE ACTIVITY



DANCE DETECTIVE

Name: _____

Choose your favorite scene from the performance and analyze how the dancers told the story through movement.

1. DRAW THE SCENE

Draw the dancers and what was happening in the scene.

2. WHAT EMOTIONS DID YOU NOTICE?

Circle all that apply.



Happy



Sad



Surprised



Angry



Determined



Scared



Peaceful



Curious

Other: _____

3. WHAT MOVEMENTS HELPED TELL THE STORY?

Describe two specific movements or choreography choices you noticed.

1

2

4. WHY WERE THESE MOVEMENTS EFFECTIVE?

Explain how the movements, expressions, or timing helped you understand the story.

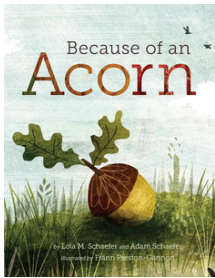


BONUS: How would this scene be different if the dancers moved in a different way? What message or feeling would that change?



FIFTH GRADE RESOURCES

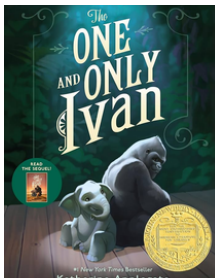
Books



"Because of an Acorn"

by Lola M. Schaefer and Adam Schaefer

Discover how one tiny acorn can support an entire forest ecosystem. This beautifully illustrated story shows how plants, animals, and habitats are interconnected.



"The One and Only Ivan"

by Katherine Applegate

Inspired by a true story, this novel follows a captive gorilla who uses art, friendship, and courage to imagine a better life. Ivan's journey explores empathy, animal well-being, and the meaning of home.



"The Dancing Hands: How Teresa

Carreño Played the Piano for President Lincoln"

by Margarita Engle

Discover how young musician Teresa Carreño found hope and strength through music after her family fled Venezuela. Her story celebrates creativity, resilience, and the power of art to comfort others.

Websites

Smithsonian National Zoo



Watch animals live and learn about their behaviors.

Link: [Explore/Watch Live Animal Webcams](#)

The Houston Zoo



Explore classroom resources about animals and conservation.

Link: [Resources for Educators](#)

CONNECT WITH US

thehobbycenter.org/education

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**Let us know what you think.
Please take our survey!**



**Post-Show
Student Survey**



**Post-Show
Teacher Survey**