

Historica Canada Education Portal

Dangerous Dreams: The Great Farini and the Highwire

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing The Great Farini biography from [The Canadians](#) series. William Leonard Hunt, also known as "The Great Farini," was an entertainer and inventor during the Victorian era. He is famous for crossing the Niagara Falls on a high wire.

Aims

With a variety of activities students will learn about Farini's life and explore the social and cultural values of the late nineteenth century. Students will reflect and draw conclusions about the similarities and differences between Farini's time and their own.

Background

This one-hour television documentary film explores the extraordinary life story of William Leonard Hunt, from his beginnings in the backwoods of Hope Township, Ontario, through worldly adventures so numerous and unusual it seems incredible that one man experienced them all. He walked a high wire across Niagara Falls, he was the leader of the Flying

Farinis, and he invented the human cannonball act, folding theatre seats, and the modern day parachute. He explored Africa and found the Lost City of the Kalahari. He was a renowned botanist, an author, and an artist whose paintings were shown alongside Canadian masters.

The first act of the documentary takes us from Farini's birth in 1838 to Canadian parents living in Lockport, New York, to his leaving home at the age of 21 after he had disgraced his conservative father by walking a tight rope across the Ganaraska River in hometown Port Hope, Ontario, under the pseudonym of "The Great Farini." The highlight of this act is the recreation of Farini's skywalk by the famous Canadian skywalker, Jay Cochrane. Cochrane's breathtaking walk is covered by six cameras, and interviews with Cochrane and Farini's biographer, Shane Peacock (who also walks a low wire for our cameras) give us insight into the mind of a high wire walker.

Act Two covers the incredible wire walking duels that took place at Niagara Falls in the summer of 1860. Georges Blondin was indisputably the greatest high wire walker in the world. In the summer of 1859 he had stunned audiences with his incredible walks across the Niagara River, taking a stove out on the wire with him and cooking an omelette, carrying a man across the wire on his back. Bill Hunt, now known as the Great Farini, was determined to take Blondin on and throughout the summer of 1860 they competed - for fame, for audiences and for riches - at Niagara and entertained and thrilled thousands of visitors, including the Prince of Wales.

In our third act, we follow Farini to Cuba where he suffers a great tragedy when his young wife, whom he is carrying on his back on a tight rope strung across a bull ring, loses her balance and falls to her death. He later re-emerges in the Barnum Brothers Circus in New York as The

Farini Brothers, playing all three brothers himself. He ends up in London, the centre of the world in 1866 and Farini soon becomes one of London's biggest stars, especially after he introduces a young trapeze artist known as "El Nino."

Act Four begins as Farini launches one of his most stunning acts, the Lulu Leap! "Lulu, the Eighth Wonder Of The World" first appeared on 29 July 1870 at the Imperatrice Theatre in Paris. She stunned the audience by walking on stage and then suddenly leaping 25 feet in the air. Her leaps increased to 40 feet and she amazed audiences all over the world until an accident in 1876 took her to a Dublin hospital where doctors discovered that Lulu was in fact a male, probably El Nino.

The final act tries to show us the rest of Farini's life - his explorations of Africa and his subsequent books, his work as an impresario in London and New York, an inventor who has patents on the human cannonball act, folding theatre seats, the parachute and a "roller boat," a botanist who created unique strains of begonias, and a painter of not inconsiderable repute. Farini died at the age of 91 in 1929. *Dangerous Dreams* is a look at an extraordinary life led by a man who believed that everyone could, and should, follow their dreams.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

William Leonard Hunt, aka "The Great Farini," was an exciting entertainer during the Victorian era. He was also a brilliant inventor, charismatic individual, noted artist, and generous soul who was beloved by all who

knew him. The story of The Great Farini expands on the following general historical themes:

- *Life during the Victorian era*
- *Social and cultural values*
- *Nineteenth century entertainment*
- *Technological innovations*

To gain greater insight into these themes, explore some of the following lesson ideas. These lessons complement the video *Dangerous Dreams: The Life of the Great Farini* from *The Canadians: Biographies of a Nation* series.

Before you show the video, ensure that your students have a firm understanding of the following terms. Knowledge of these terms will help provide the necessary background for students to enjoy greater success in the activities and their learning.

- *Circus*
- *Tight rope walking*
- *Civil War*
- *Protégé*
- *Aquarium*
- *Freak show*
- *Horticulture/Botany*
- *Racism*

1. Family and Victorian values played an important role in the young William Hunt's life. Working in partners, have your students interview a grandparent(s) or other senior citizen about the influence that the values of earlier periods played in their formative years. Students should tape

record their interview and after all interviews are completed, compile a collection of the recordings and you will have a class oral history. Be sure to create a tape for each student to keep. When the students have completed their interview, have each student write a newspaper article describing some aspect of Victorian life that they learned about from their interview. Compile all of the student's articles into a class Victorian newspaper.

2. Have your students research the life of a performer in the nineteenth Century. What problems did they face? Were they treated differently than performers are treated today? What were these differences? After the students have researched a performer, create a mind map with the performer's name in the center. Branch out from the center with descriptions of the performer, how the performer was treated, what the performer did, etc.

3. In 1867, The Great Farini performed at the Crystal Palace. Research the history of the Crystal Palace. Have students create a poster advertising Farini's performance. Make sure that the majesty, splendor, and engineering feat of the Crystal Palace is included on the poster.

4. Create a Heritage Minute for the Great Farini. Show some examples of [Heritage Minutes](#) to your students and discuss the techniques used to make them interesting and informative. Ask your students to create a storyboard for a one-minute video and if the equipment is available, you could actually produce your own Heritage Minute.

5. The Great Farini's acts were often discussed or reported on radio. Pick an event described in the video or have students research one of the Great Farini's displays and have students create their own radio script that reports one of Farini's feats. Have your students record the

broadcast to play to the class or have a Great Farini Radio Show and have students each read their broadcast in class.

6. Research circuses. Compare circuses in the past to those that exist today such as the [Cirque du Soleil](#). Have your students create a poster or newspaper ad that advertises a Victorian circus or one of Farini's events, and another poster or newspaper ad for a circus today. Display the Victorian posters and newspaper ads on one bulletin board and the posters and ads for circuses today on another bulletin board. See if you can find real posters and ads for circuses today to add to the bulletin board. Create a chart and have students list the similarities and differences between circuses in the Victorian era and circuses of today.

7. Have your students discuss the "daredevil" acts that are popular entertainment today (i.e., wrestling, extreme sports). Why are people attracted to these shows? Create a 'daredevil' hall of fame in your classroom. Students should find or draw a picture of their daredevil and produce a brief description of the daredevil to put under the picture. Have students present their daredevil to the class as they post them in the classroom. The hall of fame could include The Great Farini, El Nino, Lulu, Zazel and other daredevils that they research.

8. The Great Farini, though Canadian-born, spent most of his life living and working abroad. Is he a Canadian hero? Have your students debate the issue of "What is a Canadian?"

9. Research other Canadian inventors. Make a web page that features Canadian inventors and their inventions. Each student or pair of students should be responsible for one inventor and their inventions. Include a time line on the web site that shows when each invention was made/patented.

10. Write an obituary or Lives Lived column for The Great Farini. (For examples of obituaries, refer to your local newspaper or go to the [The Globe and Mail](#))

11. Stage a talk show. The topic should be: *Daredevil acts - Great Entertainment or Recipe for Disaster?* Guests could include The Great Farini, El Nino, or P.T. Barnum. Ensure that the show is balanced by presenting both sides of the argument.

12. The Great Farini loved to travel and, over the course of his life, spent time in many different cities. Have the students create a list of the cities that The Great Farini visited as they watch the video. Post a world map on a bulletin board with arrows pointing to the cities to which The Great Farini traveled. Have each student pick a city and create a travel brochure that might have enticed The Great Farini to visit.

13. A Member of Parliament in London, England, drafted the Dangerous Performances Act to try to prevent The Great Farini from performing. The Dangerous Performances Act was one of the reasons that The Great Farini left London. Research the Dangerous Performances Act. Research the existing legislation that protects modern performers. Hold a mock court to determine if The Great Farini should be allowed to perform at your school today, or what changes will have to be made to allow The Great Farini to perform. Hold another mock court that could have taken place in London to determine if The Great Farini should be allowed to perform.

14. Have your students research an individual whose theories had a great impact on the nineteenth and early twentieth Centuries. Create a "walk of fame" in your classroom honouring each of the individuals that

the students researched. Have each student investigate one particular individual and create a brief write-up of the person to accompany a picture or drawing of the person to be displayed in your class. You could also use hall bulletin boards to create a "hall of fame" in your school.

Resources

Peacock, Shane. *The Great Farini - The High Wire Life of William Hunt*. Penguin Books, Toronto. 1995.