

Pepi and his Palaces of Variety

This section explores the life and career of the enigmatic Signor Rino Pepi (1872-1927) from Florence and his passion for theatre. Rejecting a life in the family business, he became one of the most renowned quick-change artists in Europe, even performing in front of Queen Victoria at her castle in Florence. After marrying an equally enigmatic half Irish-half Italian widowed countess, he moved to England, eventually setting up a chain of variety theatres across northern England.

You will also be able to introduce children to the fascinating world of variety theatre, a tradition still alive today, but mainly viewed in our lounges on television rather than in a theatre.

There are many opportunities for literacy work in this section using the materials we've sourced. How you use them will depend upon which literacy elements you are teaching at the time. Additional activities include the development and application of skills in mathematics and geography.

At the end of this section is a suggestion for TOPIC ACTIVITIES building on children's cumulative learning from the whiteboard activities in this section.

Activities in this section can be enhanced by borrowing [Pepi and the Hippodrome Discovery Box](#) and the [Variety Acts Discovery Box](#).



1a | Signor Rino Pepi

ACTIVITIES

READ and EXPLAIN Signor Rino Pepi.

- What are children's first impressions of Pepi from these images? (These are the only ones we have of him.)
- Look at what he is wearing – including hats and ties. What can children deduce about his style? Remember that he had been an internationally famous artist and was now keen to promote himself as an impresario (the manager of a musical, theatrical, or operatic company).
- What words would children use to describe him and his attire?
- Ask children to recall key people, places and events in Pepi's life. Use the words on screen as prompts – placing them in sequence to create a timeline of his life.



LINK TO WORKSHOP – Signor Pepi comes into school

1b | Signor Pepi - an amazing life

ACTIVITIES

This offers an alternative or extension to the previous activity.

READ and EXPLAIN Signor Rino Pepi.



- Pepi's life story has been summarised in this sequence of illustrations. You'll find copies in the Resources Folder [Cartoons and templates] which you can use to create a timeline of Pepi's life.
- The sequence begins with his intention to work in the theatre, ultimately as a quick-change artist; his performance in front of Queen Victoria in his home city; touring around Europe; meeting the Countess, his future wife; his farewell performance in Barrow, the opening of the Hippodrome in Darlington; his expansionist plans for other Hippodromes which required a lot of travel around the north of England; bringing one of the most famous stars of the time to perform at the Hippodrome; and then his death.
- Ask children to create captions to place under each image.
- You could also use these as preparation for the final Topic Activity (if you intend to do this).

2a | Quick-change

ACTIVITIES

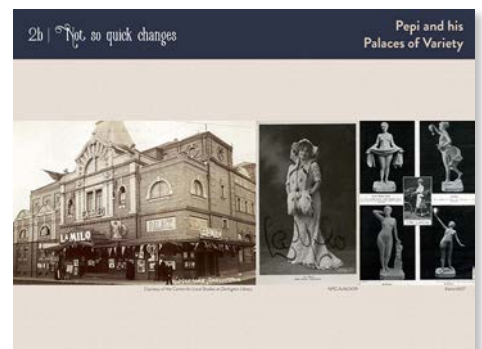
- Explain what a quick-change artist does. You'll find some good examples on YouTube, especially one clip of Fregoli, who was a contemporary of Pepi.
- Talk about Pepi's act in this photographic sequence of, *Love Always Victorious*, his most famous act, which topped the bill at the London Pavilion for three months. It's a 15-minute sketch in which he played seven characters – male and female – and required him to sing as soprano and tenor.
- You'll find the full magazine article outlining his act in the Resources Folder [Pepi] useful for extended literacy work.
- Ask children to suggest how he might have been able to change costumes and appearances so quickly.



2b | Not so quick changes

ACTIVITIES

- Ask children to identify the star of the show at the Hippodrome from this photograph taken around 1911.
- Explain that La Milo's real name was Pansy Montague and that she came from Australia. Her act was to recreate famous female classical statues by painting herself white and sometimes using fabrics and props to drape over her body.
- Compare with Pepi's act where he too changed into different characters, but much more quickly.
- Ask children if they have seen human statues in the street? What did they represent? Which props did they use? What did each act do when you gave them some money? What made them so fun to watch?
- Play statue charades. Provide character cards for children to pose as characters. Allow a designated amount of time for children to draw props, costume elements or other visual clues to help others guess who they are when they 'freeze'.



4 | Spotlight on Pepi

ACTIVITIES

- We don't know who actually occupied the boxes on the opening night of the theatre, but let's imagine that Pepi and his wife, Countess Mary, sat in one of them.
- What might they be thinking? What might they say to each other either at the start of the show or at the end? What might they say about some of the acts?
- Print off a copy of this image from the Resources Folder [Pepi] and ask children to draw or cut and paste images of Pepi and Countess Mary onto them.
- Inside the speech bubbles ask children to script a brief conversation they might have had.
- There's also an adapted version of this image in the same folder.



You could also use this activity after your theatre tour when children will have taken in the opulence of the theatre's decoration and imagine a similar conversation between two occupants of the box describing what they see.

[LINK TO THEATRE TOUR – View the from a box.](#)

5a | Variety Acts - showmanship

ACTIVITIES

READ and EXPLAIN Variety theatre

- Show Youtube clips of a range of variety acts (they're easily found through a simple search). Ask children to describe each and what makes them entertaining.
- Which acts do children like and why?
- What type of variety acts have children seen on TV programmes recently? How do they compare with the older acts?
- Talk about the function of these cards, all of which are autographed, some with a message.
- Point out that some acts are after Pepi's time, but continued the tradition of acts presented at the Hippodrome in his time.
- Can children tell how each act entertains?
- There are more cards in the Resources Folder [Acts]. Print out copies, cut up and mount onto individual cards and ask children to create a card game based on Snap, Happy Variety Families or a new game of their own creation.



EXTENSION ACTIVITY

- Give groups of children copies of publicity materials, programmes, and souvenir cards of different acts in the Resources Folders and ask them to create a list of the different types of acts from all these sources. We've provided an extended list below.
- Ask children talk about what they'd like to see in a variety show today and to create their own repertoire for an evening's show.
- Choose an act that children like today and ask them to write some publicity materials.
- How might the compère introduce each act?

A TO Z OF VARIETY ACTS

Acrobat	Knife thrower
Animal act	Magician
Ballet	Mime artist
Band	Musician
Clairvoyant	Orchestra
Contortionist	Painter
Conjuror	Puppeteer
Comedian	Quick-change artist
Dancer	Shadowgraph artist
Fire eater	Singer
High wire/tightrope	Sketches (comedy or slapstick)
Hypnotist	Trick cyclist
Impersonator	Trapeze artist
Juggler	Ventriloquist

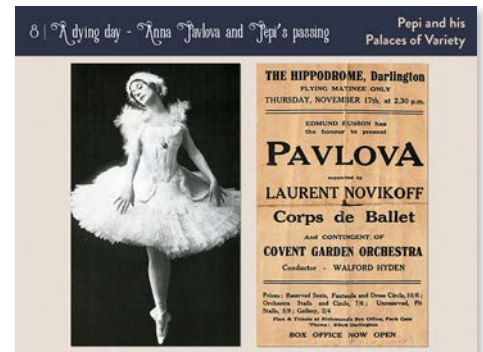
This is not a definitive list. We're sure that your children will recall seeing other novelty acts.

8 | A dying day - Anna Pavlova and Pepi's passing

ACTIVITIES

READ and EXPLAIN Anna Pavlova

- Explain why it was so special to Pepi to present Anna Pavlova at the Hippodrome.
- Compare ticket prices for her performance to those in other programmes. (A fauteuil is a French word for an elegantly carved upholstered armchair – a term Pepi might have introduced to entice his more affluent clients to pay more to see an internationally-famous dancer.)
- Follow her route around the north east using the 1904 railway map in the Resources Folder [Transport].
- Watch a clip of 'The Dying Swan'. You'll find several on Youtube, including one of Pavlova performing it. Capture children's impressions of her performance to create a word bank for a later literacy activity.
- Focus on the music of this ballet sequence.
- Talk about the irony of Anna Pavlova performing 'The Dying Swan' in Pepi's theatre while he lay dying, unable to see the greatest star he ever brought to Darlington.
- Ask children to script a newspaper article or tribute knowing that Pepi never saw Anna Pavlova perform in his theatre, but lay dying at his home.



9 | Farewell to Pepi

ACTIVITIES

- Tell children that this short poem was an anonymous tribute which appeared in a Darlington Operatic Society theatre programme shortly after his death.
- Look at rhyme and repetition. What emotions does it evoke?
- Ask children to recall the life of Pepi – his origins, early career, European tours, marriage to the Countess, theatrical achievements, life and work in and around Darlington and then his death and burial. Use this collage to help recall key figures and events. There's a copy in the Resources Folder [Pepi].
- List words to describe how he might have felt at key points in his life and career.
- Children write their own poem to celebrate his life.



TOPIC ACTIVITY

Pepi's amazing life

As a culmination activity, bringing together and sharing children's learning about Pepi's life you could ask them to tell his story.

This could be a stage play. They could do this in character, using props from our [Pepi and the Hippodrome Discovery Box](#). Or it could be presented in a story board format by drawing or cutting and pasting cartoon illustrations onto templates of a stage. You'll find templates for both and a selection of cartoon illustrations in the Resources Folder [Cartoons and templates].

As preparation for this you could invite Signor Pepi into school for a hot seating workshop giving children the opportunity to interview him and find more about his life. Beforehand, develop children's interview techniques avoiding closed questions but encouraging open questions.

[LINK TO WORKSHOP – Signor Pepi comes into school](#)

School variety shows

As an alternative culmination activity, bringing together and sharing children's learning about variety theatre you could ask them to work in groups to create their own variety show.

- Ask children to create their own acts. They could work in pairs or in threes.
- Which props or items of costume would they need? Use props from our [Variety Acts Discovery Box](#) to stimulate connections.
- Create a stage name for their act.
- Help them promote their act by devising a one line strapline – using alliteration or hyperbole. Show examples from old programmes.
- Ask each act to prepare a summary of their acts to use in publicity material.
- Let children rehearse and perform their acts to the class.
- Create a series of variety shows with up to eight acts in each.
- Design a programme for each 'variety show' using the format in old Hippodrome programmes.
- Create a poster (provide a template or use the same format in old programmes). Use ICT to employ different fonts/sizes/colours.

Variety walk of fame

As an extension to the previous activity ask children to create a class 'walk of fame'. This could be produced as a series of commemorative ground or wall plaques.

- Ask children to draw around their shoes or feet on a piece of card then cut out the shapes.
- Decorate the inside using colour, pattern, silhouette or symbol connected to their acts.
- Place the cut out shoes or feet inside a circle or a plaque shape.
- Write their stage name around edge and a brief description of their act – draw or use cut out letters.
- Add an image of a key prop or gag line if there is room.
- As a starting point or stimulus you could ask children to research Leicester Square pavement plaques, Hollywood's 'Walk of Fame' or London Blue Plaques (actors and performers).