

Young Actors Blossom through Theater

By Tracey Prohaska Carroll

Sitting in the audience, applause erupting around me, I was awed by what I'd just seen – a play about Greek mythology put on by kids between the ages of four and eight years old.

The production was professional, including all of the accoutrements of a theater performance. There was lighting and sound, props and scenery and young performers who knew all their lines and were good. As someone who finds it difficult to speak in front of large groups I was taken aback by how easy it seemed to be for these little actors.

Of course I had a personal stake in this success. My 5-year-old son had just debuted as a lion. It was the finale of his week-long theater camp experience at MoCo Arts in Keene, and while not sure what to expect when my husband and I signed him up, clearly it was a great decision.

He is now playing a role in an upcoming performance of "Frosty the Snowman" as part of MoCo's weekly Storytime Theater class. Once again our family has had the joy of watching him transform through his participation in a variety of ways.

It really made me think about theater programs for young children. How many others have grown leaps and bounds by joining in one? Who else offers youth programs? What calls an instructor to work with children at such an early age?

I had the pleasure of receiving input from two amazing organizations in the area, MoCo Arts, as I mentioned, and New England Youth Theatre in Brattleboro. Instructors and fellow parents weighed in on their experiences.



Performers Daniel, Anita, Addie and Madison rehearse a joyful scene for their upcoming performance of "Frosty the Snowman" at MoCo Arts. Photos by Tracey Prohaska Carroll.

No matter your child's personality, outgoing or shy, if you want to nurture their creativity, theater is an outlet you'll want to investigate.

"Let them be silly," Stephen Stearns said about his approach when teaching theater to young children. Stearns is the founder of New England Youth Theatre and has more than his fair share of experience teaching youth. Having been involved in the arts since performing in his high school days, he began teaching in the '90s.

Stearns began with free instruction at a nursery school through two summers working at Hilltop Montessori School and culminating his calling into his own production of a "Midsummer Night's Dream" in 1998.

"One of the first things I do in class is bring in a big puffy bean bag, walk up to it and fall into it. Clowning is the foundation for everything with the little kids," Stearns said. He offers that a key to working with youngsters is pantomime.

Some lessons have the children standing very still like statues in a museum and keeping that posture while an acting night janitor comes to do the evening's dusting. Other times they can pretend to be a five person snowflake and then melt into a puddle of water.

"They learn to work with physical body connections. They become animated, and then become dancers through a game," Stearns explained.

New England Youth Theatre has two classes specifically for children in the four to eight year range. The first is "Drama and Dress Up," where children learn in a show-and-tell atmosphere. The second is called "Page to Stage," where a classic story is chosen and then learned to be performed on the big stage.

Both classes were added to the organizations repertoire in 2003 when the theater company expanded and moved to its current location.

Danielle Fitzpatrick is the program director for young arts at MoCo Arts. She has been teaching its Storytime Theater class for just over a decade, a musical theater class for children in Pre-K through 2nd grade – where my son J.J. finds himself every Thursday afternoon as

he and 20 others rehearse for this semester's performance of "Frosty."

"This particular age group is exceptional at imagining they are someone/thing else, because they are still steeped in the world of imaginary play. Putting on a play is not that different than playing house. The children are often able to embody characters well, since they still use their bodies to express themselves a lot (ergo the temper tantrums you see at home).

"They love working together to create something special and they are often not judgmental of themselves or others at that age. They *love, love, love* to sing and dance! Materials have to be very simple and carefully prepared so that they can grasp it, but they are sponges and soak it up very quickly," Fitzpatrick said.

Helping children find their "voice" and develop confidence is a love for her.

"Every week when our Storytime Theater class starts, we chant "tah-dah" and then "teamwork" to capture the main elements of the class: the confidence and the cooperation," she said.

MoCo's mission is to transform lives through movement and creative expression. Transformation definitely happens over the course of a Storytime Theater semester.

"A lot of changes take place," Fitzpatrick said as she explains the varied temperaments the children exhibit in the beginning. She describes some as timid or reserved and says many have different understandings of what it takes to put on a play.

"First the children get excited about the material, the songs, the dances, the story and the characters. Through this they begin to understand the aspects of a story. Their excitement bubbles over in everything they do, and often children become more motivated to learn and to practice than they were before.

I have heard that some of the children who were reluctant to read began by reading their script, the story that the script was based upon and then other books, too. The theater classes actually motivated them to read," Fitzpatrick said.

Surely a benefit any parent would love to have their child reap. Marie Duggan is the mother of 7-year-old Anita who has been



Tah-dah! Practicing the big finish for "Frosty the Snowman" at MoCo Arts, featuring Sophie, Chase, Daniel, Lily, Camille, Madison, Lillian and Skylar.

involved in theater at MoCo since she was 4 years old.

"It's her space. She likes being a part of something; it's not about being a star. In "Frosty" she is old enough to have a good amount of speaking parts, and yet it almost seems like she wishes she was doing more of the chorus to be part of the group." Duggan said of her daughter's experience with Storytime Theater's current production.

Vicki Riding is another mom who is grateful for the influence theater has on her son Ethan, who is eight.

"The sense of teamwork and camaraderie amongst all the children is evident. I like the fact that with Storytime Theater, Ethan is honing his public speaking skills (and he doesn't even realize it). He does not have a fear of speaking in front of groups, a skill that will serve him well throughout his life." Riding said.

Look for upcoming classes at both MoCo Arts and New England Youth Theatre, as both organizations have ongoing classes for children ages four and up. Audiences can catch all the wintry magic of "Frosty the Snowman" onstage Jan. 12 at MoCo's Black Box Theater.

For more information about these performing arts centers, visit www.moco.org and www.neyt.org.

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