

75 YEARS OF CHILDREN'S THEATRE: MORE THAN JUST A THEATRE SCHOOL



Young actors at the Children's Theatre

Rebecca Anne Clark

In 1933, Dorothy Davis and Violet Walters decided that there was a need for a children's theatre school in Montreal. It was the height of the Great Depression, and the two female entrepreneurs were not taken seriously. One critic said he didn't think the operation would last more than six months. The school started out with 25 kids in Davis' basement but it grew quickly. At its height, more than 400 children were enrolled at five locations across Montreal.

This year co-directors Erin Downey-Silcoff and Danusia Lapinski celebrate the theatre's 75th anniversary. Nowadays, classes are limited to twelve kids each, and the school has between 50 and 100 children each year, ranging in age from four to 17. If you think that four is too early for a child to be learning the ins and outs of acting, you'd be mistaken as many students who started young have gone on to pursue a career in acting. But, as Downey-Silcoff emphasizes, "It's not necessarily about becoming a movie star."

The Children's Theatre teaches life skills through theatre exercises – skills that children will use regardless of their career path. Both co-directors point to the benefits gained by children who are enrolled. Self-esteem and confidence are big ones.

Lapinski says that students see an improvement in marks at school, and a lot of that comes from improved confidence. "They're more likely to raise their hand in class; the teacher will notice them more," she says. She also notes that rehearsal results in improvements in reading skills. All students get a full script, even the youngest children, and memorizing it forces them to practice reading. In addition to these, Lapinski talks about other skills that children develop: self-discipline, self-control, listening, and teamwork. Extroverts, she says, learn to share the spotlight and become more accommodating to others. "The introverts usually blossom at the end of the year," she adds.

In the first half of the year, from October to December, children learn basic theatre skills such as how to project and manipulate their voices,

use their bodies and emote. Fun techniques such as voice warm-ups, pantomime, and improv games lead into blocking and character development. To show off their new skills, including monologues, poetry readings and short skits, they present a Winter Cabaret in December. In January, students from every class are given a full-length script for a half-hour-to-hour play that will be performed in May. These scripts are children's plays, often fairy tales with a modern twist. And in keeping with the goal of developing new skills, the roles are chosen to help individual students develop.

"There might be a child who always likes to play the princess," says Lapinski, "but we'll give her the role of the wicked witch for a change, and it might help her be more assertive."

Most plays are put on for an audience of family and friends, but the performance class – made up of returning students who want to focus on performance – put on their show at venues around the community, including schools, hospitals, and seniors' centres.

Apart from their regular program, the Children's Theatre offers classes for children with special needs, such as autism, and weekend workshops for young-at-heart adults. And for the first time this year, they will offer classes in French. An invitation to the francophone population of Montreal, the classes will also give French immersion children a space to practice their French after school. "We've had French kids coming to our classes to improve their English," says Downey-Silcoff. "When we first announced that we were offering classes in French, we had parents of French immersion students saying, 'I'd put my kid in that!'"

Lapinski considers its intimacy one of the special traits of the Children's Theatre. "We show kids we love them," she says. Much as in real theatre, kids develop a bond with each other and with the instructors. And like the skills they pick up in theatre school, that bond will be with them for many years to come. ■

For more information, see:
www.childrens-theatre.ca

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