

SECRETS FOR SUCCESS CHILD'S PLAY: ENGAGING THE NEXT GENERATION

Magic is something you surrender to age. Old enough to know that there is no Santa Claus, that there is no unicorn in the woods, nor mermaids in Barton Springs. Life forces upon you so many facts and figures, you become wedded to reality and fantasy is banished to the movie theater, the television screen, or the video game console. The age of enlightenment seems to be getting younger and younger in our cynical age. My eleven-year-old nephew recently condescended to tell me that there was no Easter Bunny. But magic is strangely resilient and through the art of live theater, it can jolt awake the child inside of us all. – Excerpt taken from article "Masons, Magic, & Making a Difference" by Bonnie Neel, Good Life Magazine

Below, two League members share stories of successful children's programming in their historic theatres. Children's programming may not be part of your venue's repertoire, but it can be a good way to give something back to the community and to engage the younger generations. We preserve historic theatres as important contributors to the economic vitality of a city or town, but we also recognize the role these architectural treasures can play in sharing culture, heritage and the arts. According to the Arts Education Partnership, engaging children in the arts helps children develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of their local communities and teaches them that they can make a positive change in their own lives and in their surroundings.

THE STRAND'S CHILDREN'S MOVIE SERIES CREATES COMMUNITY HEROES

By Kara J. McVay, manager of The Strand Theatre in downtown Delaware, OH. Owned by Ohio Wesleyan University, The Strand has been entertaining local residents for 91 years. In January, the Delaware Chamber of Commerce presented McVay with a community service award for many contributions, but The Strand's children's film series was spotlighted.

When it comes to running Delaware, Ohio's historic Strand Theatre, I try to be as flexible as *The Incredibles'* Elastigirl.

I'm always looking for new ways to stretch my theatre's offerings in ways that will expand community involvement and broaden people's imaginations. (Happily, I'm able to do this while outfitted in my signature Ohio Wesleyan University sweatshirt rather than a Spandex bodysuit. I often wear a hood, but never a cape!)

One project that has helped the university-owned theatre reach out to the local community is the Children's Summer Movie Series. The event is a long-standing tradition of the Strand, offering free admission for area children to come and enjoy some of their favorite films.

While planning for the 2003 series, I decided to add a fundraising component to the annual event. Although I continue to admit children for free, I decided to encourage families to make small, voluntary contributions to local charities each time their children participated in the program. Collection bins for such things as canned goods and gently used clothing are set up in the Strand's lobby.

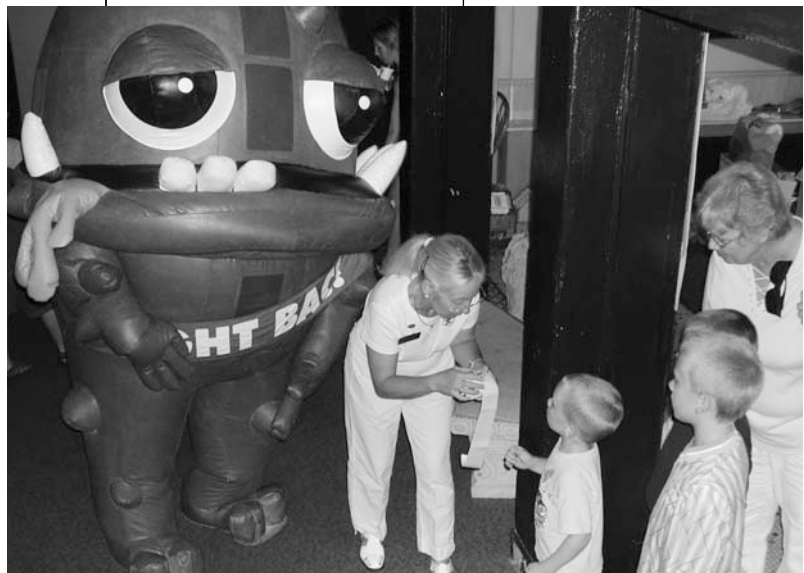
The response has been truly heroic. Over the years, the Strand has collected pantries' worth of canned goods for area food banks and pick-up trucks' worth of dog and cat food for local animal shelters. The theatre also has held successful drives to collect school supplies and items for the local health department's "Help Me Grow" program.

In addition to benefiting less-fortunate Delaware residents (including the furry ones!) the program also encourages chil-

dren to talk to their parents about the importance of giving to others. Taking cans of cat food to the movies is bound to spark some stimulating conversation! It also teaches children the power of teamwork. As Mr. Incredible learns, it isn't always best to work alone.

The public has embraced this program with open arms, and I now start getting questions months in advance about what items the Strand will collect during the coming summer. To provide the greatest community good, I rotate the charities that are served.

To add to the program's educational value, I sometimes arrange for a speaker or special activity to tie into a film's theme or message. In the past, this has resulted in visits from the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, which treated young moviegoers to encounters with penguins, alligators, and armadillos – oh, my! The



SCHOOL CHILDREN LEARN THE DANGER OF GERMS DURING THE STRAND'S FILM SERIES. PHOTO COURTESY OF OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY.



THE STRAND THEATRE IN DELAWARE, OHIO. PHOTO COURTESY OF OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY.

health department also has visited the Strand with its "Fight Bac" character, a big green germ that talks to children about the importance of washing their hands.

Opportunities for such tie-ins are endless – just look around your community to see who might have a meaningful message for your young audience. Most of these speakers will come for free, which means the price is right!

I'm so proud that the Strand's Children's Summer Movie Series can fill such an important role in its community. The special program, held on Tuesdays, draws about 550 moviegoers each week, with showings at 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.

For those of you seeking to begin similar programs, just remember: Be creative and be flexible. No doubt you, too, will find that you have a community filled with superheroes.

THE AUSTIN SCOTTISH RITE CHILDREN'S THEATRE

Introduction and epilogue by Gordon W. Kelso, executive director of The 1869 Scottish Rite Children's Theatre in Austin, TX.

League membership should never be underestimated!

My old theatre was more a curiosity; a "private meeting place" where old men (and old women, too!) would come and go with only the occasional "howdy" to passers-by; a structure frequented by O'Henry and his countless cronies, barely recognized as a true community treasure by 21st Century theatre-goers.

Until! Until I learned about the importance of creating your theatre's special community niche while attending the Minneapolis LHAT conference several years ago. It seemed a natural for us to engage in quality, affordable, traditional Children's Theatre production and after a short learning curve, we're enjoying a successful third season as Austin's ONLY "year-round" producer of prime children's theatre. This, thanks to a lesson learned at a League gathering.

MASONS, MAGIC AND MAKING THE DIFFERENCE

The following excerpts taken from article "Masons, Magic, & Making a Difference" by Bonnie Neel originally printed in the Good Life Magazine, July 2006

Founded in 2004, the Scottish Rite Children's Theatre conjures the magic of live theater for children ages eighteen months to eighty years. Producing six or seven shows a year, the company is headed by the Kelso family. Gordon is the executive director, his wife Rita is the costume manager and technical director, and their daughter, Gwendolyn, is the company manager and

frequent lead actress. Children's theater gets a bad rap. Gordon Kelso says Scottish Rite Children's Theatre is different: "When most people think of children's theater, they think it is kids playing on stage. We don't do that-for any number of reasons-but the chief reason is children need to be in school studying."

The casts are usually four professional actors who double-up roles playing multiple characters. A recent production of *Sleeping Beauty* saw the same actress playing both the queen and the bad fairy, Penelope The Professional Party Pooper.

"We try to put on stage the very, very best that we possibly can," he says. "Quality sets, quality sight lines, the best costumes, and the best technical (skills) that we can provide that will best enhance the story and the theater experience for the kids."

Gordon Kelso knows about quality theater. He was a sound engineer for the 1968 revival of *My Fair Lady* starring Douglas Fairbanks Jr. and he met his wife, Rita Kelso, when she was a professional ice skater in the *Ice Follies* with Peggy Fleming. Later, the two of them worked and toured across the country with Disney before returning to Austin to

open the Erwin Center in 1977 with Gordon Kelso as the original stage manager. "What we bring to the table is a knowledge and understanding of first-class, Broadway quality staging. And that's what we insist on having as the creative bar," he says. So if you think you'll be seeing a large purple dinosaur singing mind-dulling ditties, think again.

SETTING THE SCENE

Quality magic begins at the front door. The Scottish Rite Children's Theatre is located in a historic Masonic Building, the original edifice of which was built in 1869. When the Masons bought the building in 1910, they replaced the old stage but continued to use the priceless hand-painted backdrops that are still featured in current productions.

The theater itself is a Texas treasure-a beautiful blend of a stately auditorium and an elegant playhouse with a white elevated stage and painted blue ceiling with stars. Most of the action of each play takes place on the five steps leading to the stage and there is a taped area in front where the children in the audience sit.

Each show is preceded by a reading of the rules. Characters from the play come over the loudspeakers, saying, "Please



CHARACTERS FROM THE AUSTIN SCOTTISH RITE'S 2007 SEASON. PHOTOGRAPH BY KENNETH GALL.

IDEALLY, IF CHILDREN ARE EXPOSED TO GOOD, WHOLESOME TRADITIONAL THEATER IN AN HISTORIC SETTING, THEY WILL GROW AN APPRECIATION FOR THEATER AND THE GENERAL LESSONS OF MORALITY AND ETHICS THAT ARE AT THE HEART OF EVERYTHING WE DO HERE.

do not scream in our production. If any of you have parents who scream or cry, please take them to the lobby." The characters come out, get the kids to stand up and sing, get some of that energy out. A hundred little voices chant that "We watch with our eyes, we listen with our ears, and we keep our mouths closed. We put bottom glue on our bottoms. When we sit down, we're gonna be stuck." The audience is placed in control of their own behavior and they learn that they are part of the play.

As a classically trained actress from the prestigious Webster University Conservatory of Theatre Arts in St. Louis, Gwendolyn Kelso explains the unique challenges in performing for children: "You have the fourth wall (in regular theater) and the audience is looking in on a 'slice of life.' But in children's theater, if you have a fourth wall, you're gonna lose them. So you take the fourth wall and extend it past the audience and make the kids just another part of the play."

Throughout the production, the kids are constantly involved as the story unfolds. They shout out names for the newborn princess. They yell that the bad guy is hiding under the sofa. Two precious little girls are selected from the audience to walk on stage, put on pink fuzzy wings, wave a sparkling wand, and bless the new baby.

The plays are written to involve the children directly. Scottish Rite Children's Theatre usually writes its own scripts from well-known tales in the public domain. Gwendolyn Kelso explains the process: "We decided to do *Jack and the Beanstalk* and I was reading through all these published works. There was one where the ogre beat his

ogre wife. I'm like, 'Oh, I could never do this!' I needed something that would be suitable. Our audiences are so young. You can't have the ogre beating his ogre wife- ever, really, but especially not with an eighteen month old. So we rewrote a lot of the scripts."

The rewriting allows the company to reach every demographic in the audience, even those of us with mortgage payments and credit scores. While *Sleeping Beauty* is awakened with a kiss on the hand, the upcoming *Rumpelstiltskin* features a king with financial problems inventing the IRS (much to the dismay of all his kingdom). Such cross-generational content is deliberate and evocative. "While I was touring with Disney," says Gordon Kelso, "I would slip out and look at the audience. There was this marvelous happening where three generations of the same family were each enjoying the show at their own levels. The grandparents, of course, were enjoying the other two generations reacting and little ones were enjoying watching their grandparents react to certain aspects of the show."

DISNEY DO'S AND DON'TS

The homage to Disney has its drawbacks. Kids, for the most part, are familiar with the general storyline of each show, but they'll defend to the death the details from the Disney line. When the king and queen invite the audience to name their young *Sleeping Beauty*, the audience is doggedly devoted to the name of the princess given in the movie. Gwendolyn Kelso says, "Aurora is from Disney. We have our kids in the audience- participation part, and we ask them for names for the baby. We were going with Barbara, with Troy, with whatever the kids

threw out...So we yell, 'We shall name the girl Rachel!' Two hundred and ninety-nine kids are like 'Noooooooooooo!' They will yell and scream and holler and stamp their feet, until you change the kid's name to Aurora, because that's what they expect from Disney. 'Aurora!' Or they won't let the show go on."

Adults, too, have a hard time letting go of Disney storylines. "Parents have called and said *Rumpelstiltskin* is not a family-friendly show," says Gwendolyn Kelso. "But if you've seen any other shows here at SRCT, we rewrite them to make them family friendly, very family-friendly. (Originally) *Jack and the Beanstalk* does not end with the ogre and the mom hanging out afterwards. He plummets to his death, but we don't do that here. Everyone lives happily ever after here."

Gordon Kelso concurs. "When you use new stuff, folks don't follow quite as heartily as they do the known pieces. Perfect example: *The Sword and the Stone* was pretty popular. That was our very first production with our company. Everybody knows that story. But the next show that we did was absolutely brilliant. Gorgeous show called *The Clown Prince*. It was extremely well cast, imaginatively blocked, costumes were gorgeous, and the cast was probably one of the best we've ever had. It was just a stunning production. But we learned from that production. One, it was not a familiar story. Two, it did clowns. Not all kids like clowns. We learned a hard lesson."

But as learning curves go, Scottish Rite Children's Theatre is ahead of the game. Halfway through its second season, it has already gained

a reputation for excellence. In her review of *Charlotte's Web* for The Austin Chronicle, Heather Cole wrote, "Most impressive about the production are the high standards invested in family entertainment. Quality counts in Scottish Rite's *Charlotte's Web*...."

The Austin Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, the entity that owns the building where Scottish Rite Children's Theatre operates, shares these sentiments and has deeded the property to the theater company—a five million dollar vote of confidence.

The connection to the Masons runs deep, as both Gordon and Rita Kelso are active members of the society. Kelso explains, "We believe very seriously in trying to do what we can for children. That's the Mason's way. In this world that we live in these days, idealism and altruism aren't understood particularly well. Ideally, if children are exposed to good, wholesome traditional theater in an historic setting, they will grow an appreciation for theater and the general lessons of morality and ethics that are at the heart of everything we do here."

Sure it sounds a little quaint and old-fashioned. But the little girls who attend the show dress up in their very best princess gear. Watching their faces light up as they boo the bad fairy and clap when the princess is awakened, there is something wholesome and intensely reassuring in the discovery that entertainment doesn't have to involve the video violence of *Grand Theft Auto* or the vapid cuteness of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Grownups need magic and hope, too. Sometimes we find it watching the audience as well as the stage.

These dreams are ambitious but very real. After each show, the audience files out into the imposing lobby made soft and whimsical by green frogs embroidered on pink pillows and beanbag chairs. Every actor in the show is in the lobby and they greet each child, sign the playbill fashioned into a coloring page, and give a taste of celebrity culture without bare midriffs and Britney pouts. Gwendolyn Kelso, a veteran of these lobby scenes, speaks right to the heart of what the Scottish Rite Children's Theatre is all about: "When we were doing *Charlotte's Web*, the kids would come up and say, 'We hate that Charlotte died. We're gonna go home and we're gonna rewrite it. We're gonna change it.' The kids would go home and they'd rewrite it and they'd act it out for their families. You see them smiling. You see parents smiling. They're creating and they're communicating."

"Theater has been used for years as that place you get away to and you learn. You go in and you don't know where you'll be transported. And if you let yourself, you can go anywhere. That, in and of itself — if the show is done well — is just amazing."

EPILOGUE

When you mix an historic theatre experience with fairy wings, magic wands and childhood imagination, the combination cultivates enthusiastically new, and recurring, generations of theatre goers. For all of us desperately searching for ways to preserve our old treasures, first discovering and then "fine-tuning" our unique niche' in the community is the key to an "everlasting" success.

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DO YOU HAVE A "SECRET FOR SUCCESS?"

As we did in the preceding article, LHAT would like to start regularly sharing stories of unique ways our member theatres have found their own "secrets for success."

- Have you . . .
- Held a unique fundraiser?
 - Found a unique programming niche?
 - Built a solid relationship with and brought significant contributions to your community?
 - Identified a new or unique naming opportunity within your theatre?
 - Rented your venue to an unconventional user?

LHAT is all about networking and one of the ways you can mentor your fellow members is by telling them how you have found ways to solidify your theatre's reputation and contribute to its bottom line.

If you would like to share your story in a future issue of *INLEAGUE*, contact Colleen Poehman at LHAT: info@lhat.org.