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IF YOU GIVE A KID A PLAY

How one theater company provides unforgettable experiences.

by Amy Gordon

To learn more about Theatreworks USA, visit www.theatreworksusa.org.

In a small Chelsea rehearsal space, I sit watching a group performance of a delightful new musical that is about to tour the country. Next to me, my friend Chris accidentally kicks the chair in front of him. Its occupant is an angel-faced 4 year old with chin-length hair pulled back in pink barrettes. She slowly turns around and deliberately narrows her eyes to give Chris a look that scares him and myself more than we'd like to admit. She has been interrupted; and she is not happy.

The unforgiving blonde in front of us is one of about 30 youngsters in the room mesmerized by *If You Give a Pig a Pancake*, a collection of musical interpretations of seven popular children's books. *Pancake* is the latest in a long line of shows put on by Theatreworks USA, the country's oldest not-for-profit theater company catering to young and family audiences. In its 49-year history, the Manhattan-based team has brought theater to more than 78 million people, many of whom might otherwise never get to see a live performance. Theatreworks develops and produces more than 20 shows each year and performs on national tours, for school trips and in free productions offered each summer in New York City.

"It's been a wonderful thing for the students," explains Eleanor Tamigi-Marino, librarian at PS 214 Lorraine Hansberry Academy in the Bronx, who has booked Theatreworks performances at her school for several years. "For some, it's the closest they'll ever get to see a Broadway show or anything close to it. The children get so excited."

Tamigi-Marino's school is just one stop for the *Pancake* team on its nationwide tour. Throughout the next three months, the cast of six will perform in schools and theatres from Iowa to Tennessee. Each production goes on the road with one stage manager and the cast members, who also serve as assistant stage managers.

"I think of it as guerilla theater," explains Christopher Norwood, currently touring in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. Actors take turns driving and often improvise on stage for reasons ranging from a cast member's illness to sets not fitting into a performance space. They present in classrooms that hold fewer than 50 people one day and 2,000-seat theaters the next, and they must always be prepared to make the show work so that kids can understand and enjoy it.

"We take the development process very seriously," explains creative director Molly Meador. "We get feedback from kids throughout the whole process about what's working, what's not, what makes sense and

what they don't understand." The goal is to stimulate children to develop a critical eye. If the play is based on a book, Theatreworks hopes to encourage kids to read the book and think about the differences between the play and the original work.

Historically-inspired shows such as *Freedom Train*, which is based on the Underground Railroad, supplement what is taught in the classroom. In one instance, feedback from teachers revealed that one of the most difficult curricula to teach is the 4th grade civics unit. Theatreworks responded with *We The People*, which goes on tour this winter.

"[Theatreworks'] idea is not to talk down to kids with their shows," says Kevin Del Agula, who has worked with Theatreworks for more than ten years as an actor, director and writer. "In the end, they want to put on an entertaining show that people of all ages want to see."

A time-tested formula and incredible talent give the organization a distinct advantage. Companies in other cities lack access to the high-caliber creativity pool that New York City offers. Under the Theatre for Young Audiences contract, appearing in a Theatreworks production opens the door for actors to become members of the Actor's Equity Association, which offers health benefits and eligibility to audition for another level of projects. As such, Theatreworks counts several major Broadway players among its alumni, including four-time Tony award-winning director Jerry Zaks (*A Bronx Tale*, *Little Shop of Horrors*) and Tony award-winning performer Roger Bart (*The Producers*, *Young Frankenstein*).

From the actors on stage to the office staff that keeps things running behind the scenes, the Theatreworks team's passion is almost palatable. "We all do this because something lit a spark in us," says Meador, "and who knows what kid you're giving that to?"

Back in the performance of *Pancake*, the crowd sits mesmerized as actors run around the stage and become new characters with each costume change. The audience members, young and old, laugh when something is funny and sit on the edges of their seats in moments of suspense. On my way home, I find the children's section of a nearby bookstore and sit at a miniature table, my knees bent up to my chin, ready to rediscover what does happen if you give a pig a pancake.

Amy Gordon is a freelance writer based in Manhattan. Her article "Best Dressed" appeared in the August issue of PARENTGUIDE News. Visit www.amygordon.com for additional insight on the writer.

