



The Star-Ledger

The right stage for young talent

Livingston's kids hone acting skills

Wednesday, May 02, 2007

BY CARMEN JURI
Star-Ledger Staff

As the mother of three girls with an interest in acting, Fatima Calcado was frustrated at the auditioning process.

In her experience, kids are repeatedly overlooked for roles because they lack stage experience. But how do children get experience on the stage if they are never in a play? she often asked herself.

"Before you get to middle school, it's difficult to get a forum for them," said Calcado, of Livingston.

Calcado reached out to other like-minded moms and formed Children's Theatre of Livingston to give local children a chance to learn all aspects of theater.

What has resulted has been more than they anyone expected.

The troupe is staging "Edna May's Musical Theatre Camp," an original play by Livingston music teacher Paul Stefany, tomorrow, Saturday and Sunday at Mount Pleasant Middle School. Tickets are \$10.

Some 80 children in grades 2 through 6 will be on stage, and 20 middle-schoolers are working behind the scenes on lighting and sound.

The musical -- which is art imitating life -- is about a camp that teaches children all the aspects about the theater. Edna May, a former Broadway star, runs the Pennsylvania camp.

Stefany said the theme of the play is "hold onto your dreams," also the title of one of the songs he wrote.

"It's acceptance of the wisdom of age by kids. It's a big thing not seen in our society," said Stefany, who teaches at Hillside Elementary School.

Every child has at least one line -- a request by the moms who run the group.

"They said, 'But we need 80 parts.' That was a challenge," he said.

Once they were determined to pursue a theater camp, the moms got busy.

They recruited a director (Janene DePalo, a fourth-grade teacher who also directs plays at Riker Hill), a music director (music teacher Marilyn Fiordaliso) and a set designer (Hugh Mahon). Barbara Anderson, one of the mothers, made the costumes from fabric she had stored in her attic.

And it was all done on a shoestring budget. In fact, it started as a zero budget, Calcado said.

They charged a \$65 enrollment fee, and parent and board member Lauri Brown coordinated the ad journal. The also created and sold T-shirts with the group's logo. Additional funding was provided by the Livingston Arts Council, which gave the group a grant.

Organizers were so impassioned by the concept, they were willing to pull out their checkbooks if the funds couldn't cover the costs, said Martha Clark Ackermann, vice president of public relations.

Calcado's core group of volunteers gathered over the span of a year, planning the program, appointing an executive board, writing a mission statement and bylaws and developing a Web site.

"I couldn't pass this opportunity," DePalo said. "Not all elementary schools do shows."

The group confirmed there was interest from the community when they sent home a flier to all elementary schoolchildren, and 175 students said they would like to learn more about the program.

The Livingston Board of Education and town council embraced the concept and gave them full endorsement to use their facilities and resources.

"We all have very active schedules," said Calcado, who works full time at PSE&G in Newark. "We've made the time because this is so special."

And the students are relishing every moment of it.

Benya Kraus, a fifth-grader who plays Edna May, said she wants to pursue a career in acting and has appeared once in the local theater group's rendition of "The King And I."

"I can relate to Edna May, her personality of being a leader and her love for teaching others and holding onto your dreams," Benya said.

Learning how to work on the sound board has opened up a new dimension for eighth-grader Max Brown.

"It's really cool," said Max, 14. "They (moms) started this from nothing."

Ackermann said that echoes the sentiment of many parents.

"Parents have said, 'Thank you for giving my child the opportunity to be part of a community,'" she said.

Carmen Juri may be reached at cjuri@starledger.com or (973) 392-1853.

© 2007 The Star Ledger

© 2007 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.