

# Balancing Seasons

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The process of play production is well-documented. Likewise, is the road on which a newly written script travels from idea to workshop to performance. But how an entire season of plays is created is still murky. The method by which a slate of plays ends up on the season brochure is often confined to the confidential meetings of management, leaving others to ponder how cohesive theatre seasons seem to appear as if by magic.

As theatre artists and administrators will tell you, script quality is only one of a handful of factors to consider when lining up a roster of plays. For an explanation of the myriad of other considerations, eight M.F.A. students in the Drama and Theatre for Youth program at the University of Texas at Austin did some digging. In the spring of 2006, under the tutelage of visiting professor Laurie Brooks, these graduate students set off to decode the mysteries behind season selection at theatres for young audiences across the nation.

Each interviewer examined a TYA theatre of particular interest to them, taking into account such concerns as size, geographic location, and style. The questions were designed to target not only how a particular theatre's season is chosen, but which key individuals do the choosing. Both artistic and administrative personnel were included in the interviews, such as artistic directors, education directors, and managing directors, to offer diverse points of view. Interviewees were asked to

discuss current commissioning activity and how their specific communities factor into season selection. Finally, participants were asked to imagine a season without constraints and practical considerations.

The answers to these questions range from amusing to surprising, from deep self-examination to congratulatory, but these theatre practitioners have much in common, including the desire to produce work for young people that matters.

## The Children's Theatre Company

As one of the largest children's theatres, the Children's Theatre Company (CTC) in Minneapolis, MN serves a growing audience that demands productions with artistic integrity that are also reflective of global diversity. In reaching the various communities of Minneapolis, the artistic staff at CTC first seeks to build strong relationships between its collaborators. In the current TYA climate of popular adaptations and titles that sell, CTC places greater emphasis on a productive collaboration between commissioned artists and the theatre staff than on a particular title, so the ratio of original scripts to adaptations is always changing. "We don't have any systematic way of balancing new adaptations with original work in terms of what we commission and when we commission it," says Elissa Adams, director of new play development. "Occasionally there is extant material that we are really excited about and so we work hard to find the right match of artist and material, but, for the most part, we begin with the artists and let the conversations with them guide what we put our energies behind."

CTC's efforts in commissioning new work have expanded over the years to become woven into the fabric of the theatre. Currently, fifteen projects are under development. "We are always actively seeking to commission and produce plays that directly reflect the experience of our community—the changing face of its population, politics, geography, history, and economics," Adams says. She and Artistic Director Peter Brosius begin the process by inviting individual playwrights and directors whom they admire to share ideas and interests, and, hopefully, to reach a consensus about a new commission. Once a commission has been agreed upon, CTC's artistic staff

helps structure an individualized development process for the play that lasts, on average, two years. This process can include research trips, readings, workshops with actors or musicians, and other opportunities to bring the creative team together before rehearsals begin. Adams and Brosius consider a play ready for production when the creative team knows how the story will be told and they establish how the piece functions. With a multiplicity of plays from which to build the season, the major challenge lies in ensuring each production has the necessary institutional resources.

To determine the season roster, CTC begins with Adams and Brosius proposing a full lineup of plays to the managing director, general manager, marketing and public relations directors, and production heads. A critical question in this process, according to Adams, is "What are the ten plays that best support CTC's mission to create extraordinary theatre experiences that educate, challenge, and inspire our audience?" Each season planning process begins with an examination of commissioned plays that are ready for production. After those plays

have been determined, the rest of the season is filled with extant plays, both national and international, that balance the selection of new work.

—Sarah Rinner

### 2006–2007 SEASON

- The BFG (Big Friendly Giant)* based on the book by Roald Dahl, adapted by David Wood
- The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* based on the book by Christopher Paul Curtis, adapted by Kevin Willmott
- Antigone* based on the play by Sophocles, adapted by Greg Banks
- Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas* based on the book by Dr. Seuss, book and lyrics by Timothy Mason, music by Mel Marvin
- Tale of a West Texas Marsupial Girl* by Lisa D'Amour, music and story consultation by Sxip Shirley
- Huck Finn* based on the book by Mark Twain, adapted by Greg Banks
- The Lost Boys of Sudan* by Lonnie Carter
- Seussical the Musical* by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty
- Fashion 47* inspired by the Japanese story of the 47 Ronin, created by Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner

*Tale of a West Texas Marsupial Girl.*  
Text by Lisa D'Amour. Music and story consultation by Sxip Shirley.  
Children's Theatre Company,  
Minneapolis, MN. Graphic Designer Jen Clough



## The Coterie Theatre

"We like a season to NOT look like everyone else's," says Jeff Church, artistic director of the Coterie Theatre in Kansas City, MO. His company is known for its brave and bold choices, most famously the premiere of *The Wrestling Season* by Laurie Brooks. Their mission is to perform theatre that is challenging for the artist as well as the audience. The difficulty for Church is trying to balance their season when they want to be sure that not all of their choices are literary adaptations.

"The critical factor is finding titles that connect to both schools and the weekend public," Church said. "Quite often, though, not every play in the season will have appeal to both. Sometimes, for whatever reason, you choose to do a play knowing that it will have far less appeal to the public but will be a very strong choice for schools. Often this is artistically driven, rather than financially based." Church aims to stay true to his mission statement, to be part of a movement to create theatre for youth that is bold and takes risks. "It just makes us sick to do *Velveteen Rabbit*," he adds, "and we haven't, not under my tenure. I had to get rid of the theatre's moneymaker—thirteen years of *Winnie the Pooh*!"

Another important factor for the Coterie is producing innovative theatre that connects with the community at large. "Because the Coterie sits in the middle of a city that has been racially divided ('East of Troost Avenue' or 'West of Troost Avenue')," Church says, "the theatre

has been in an ideal spot to do some very risky plays about race and identity." These include two titles by Athol Fugard: *My Children! My Africa!* and *Valley Song*, and two plays by Carlyle Brown: *The Little Tommy Parker Celebrated Colored Minstrel Show* about a lynching in Missouri, as

well as *Buffalo Hair*, a play about the black cavalry charged with exterminating Indians. Church says he places a priority on stories of marginalized cultures, even at the risk of fiscal loss.

Church has a strong sense of what a dream season, free from any constraints, would look like.

"One time I watched the Tony Kushner/Jeanne Tesori musical *Caroline or Change*, sitting next to Laurie Brooks. And she and I both remarked that we hope children's theatre will look like that in ten years. I think there's a real chance for that to happen. Act I of *Columbinus* would be great for theatre for young audiences, if we didn't have such huge language problems. By that I mean, playwrights who want to use very, very strong language are not on the front line to get the cancellations and complaints from the schools and public (and even students)."

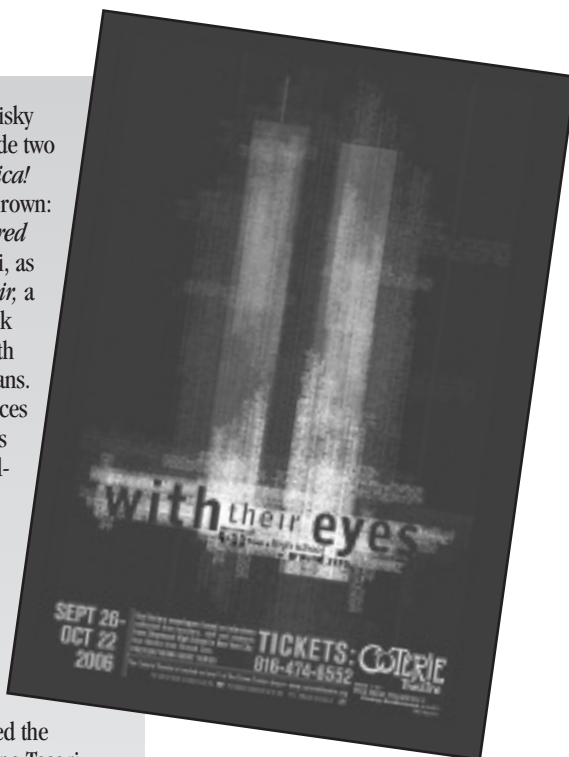
The Coterie isn't afraid to take risks. The breadth of their work is an example of how rich and diverse a season can be. As the field of theatre for young audiences evolves, companies like this will help model the future.

—Nat Miller

*Whenever Jeff Church, artistic director of the Coterie Theatre is in the library, he makes it a point to go through the children's section, paying special attention to drama. Usually, he'll find books like Thirty-Five Skits for Holidays and that sort of thing. This time, he spotted a volume called with their eyes: the view of 9/11 from a high school at ground zero.*

*In this volume he found a collection of monologues based on interviews collected from students, teachers, and the staff of Stuyvesant High School in New York City, four blocks from ground zero. After the World Trade Center attacks, English teacher Annie Thoms organized her students to use the theatre-making technique of Anna Deveare Smith "to wear and learn and embody the words of others." She and the students wanted to focus on stories that had not been heard, to avoid tear-jerking moments or empty displays of patriotism.*

*The monologues include a Muslim-American student talking about the treatment he received from others, the viewpoints of two developmentally disabled students, and a piece spoken by the custodian of the school. Thoms has said the goal was to find the "unity inherent in these stories, the natural unity of a disparate community." Thoms asked Smith to write the foreword for these published monologues and Smith's comments plumb the heart of the production: "Could it be that empathy can serve as a defense against that which could harm us?" Smith writes. "It is critical that the students have written this history, with all its details, all its particulars. It is the erasure of particulars that causes us to look at the world in black and white."*



*with their eyes: the view of 9/11 from a high school at ground zero. The Coterie Theatre, Kansas City, MO. Graphic by Kuhn & Wittenborn and the Coterie Theatre.*

### 2006–2007 SEASON

*with their eyes: the view of 9/11 from a high school at ground zero* by Annie Thoms and students

*Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing* based on the book by Judy Blume, adapted by Bruce Mason

*The Giver* based on the book by Lois Lowry, adapted by Eric Coble

*The Country of the Blind* based on the story by H.G. Wells, adapted by Frank Higgins

*Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters—an African Tale* based on the book by John Steptoe, adapted by Karen Abbott

*Young Playwrights' Festival*  
*Twice Upon A Time: Dr. Seuss' The Lorax and The Emperor's New Clothes* by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty

## Dallas Children's Theater

The challenge for Dallas Children's Theater (DCT) is finding enough quality scripts to fill its longer-than-most eleven-play season, says Nancy Schaeffer, the theatre's education director. But the million-dollar question is: How can we create balance within a season that spans such a large period of time? "We constantly network with our colleagues and survey audiences to find material that might suit our needs," says Schaeffer. The first to offer an opinion about how the season might unfold is the artistic team. The team reads and discusses the scripts, but the final decision is made by Executive Artistic Director Robyn Flatt.

There are several factors that come into play; the age-appropriateness and marketability of the script are only two elements this Texan company takes into consideration. Community is vital to their mission, so programming must take into account the school curriculum and education connections. But producing new work is also key.

"We always try to include a few works, particularly for teens, that are not necessarily known titles," Schaeffer adds. Finding scripts to engage audiences from the very young to teenagers can be daunting. DCT commissions work from resident playwright Linda Daugherty, who is currently working on *The Secret Life of Girls*, focused on girl bullying, and an adaptation of Steven Kellogg's *Pinkerton* for their very young audiences.

### 2006–2007 SEASON

*If You Give a Pig A Party* based on the book by Laura Numeroff, adapted by Nancy Schaeffer and B. Wolf

*Night of the Living Dead* based on the movie by George Romero and John Russo, adapted by Lori Allen Ohm

*The Velveteen Rabbit* based on the book by Margery Williams, adapted by Linda Daugherty

*The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson

*The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson  
*Carnival of the Animals* adapted by B. Wolf

*James and the Giant Peach* based on the book by Roald Dahl, adapted by David Wood

*Sleeping Beauty* by Charles Way

*The Secret Life of Girls* by Linda Daugherty

*A Midnight Cry* by James DeVita

*Pinkerton!!!* based on the books by Steven Kellogg, adapted by Linda Daugherty

Schaeffer says she struggles with the balance between well-known titles and new works. "I still would be happy to include some of the best-selling titles for younger audiences and families because they are good and fun and stimulating to do" she says. "I loved doing *Go Dog Go* and *Junie B. Jones* and I would always want to have plays like those in the season. But being able to include a good story—not just because it is a story that people recognize—would be wonderful."

—Lauren Kane

*In addition to being the education director for Dallas Children's Theater, Nancy Schaeffer says she enjoys a good directing challenge. And The Secret Life of Girls, by Linda Daugherty, is just the challenge Schaeffer has been looking for. The Secret Life of Girls started as part of the 2005–2006 season as a staged reading. After the reading, the play about girl bullying in schools was slated for the 2006–2007 season and started selling quickly. "We never got so many phone calls from parents," Schaeffer said. Challenges arose when Daugherty wanted the play to employ age-appropriate girls in the cast. Schaeffer knew this would be difficult because of rehearsal schedules and was distressed at the thought of having to double cast the play. After the reading Schaeffer changed her mind. She heard the voices of young women and felt, "With this piece it was the way to go."*

*Schaeffer has received phone calls from community groups that work with young women and many are interested in forming partnerships with DCT around the play. One of these partnerships is with a local medical practice, Girls to Women. The relationship is in its beginning stages, but Planned Parenthood of Dallas is in talks to plan a workshop around the play as well.*

*Cost is always a factor in season selection, especially when it comes to producing a risky play. Although Schaeffer says The Secret Life of Girls will be a cost-effective production requiring a simple set, the play is risky because of its serious content. To offset that, DCT supplements its season with title-driven shows and adaptations. "If you want to do something risky, you have to pay the price," Schaeffer says.*

*The Secret Life of Girls* by Linda Daugherty. Dallas Children's Theater, Dallas, TX. Artwork by Kim Lyle.



## Honolulu Theater for Youth

At Honolulu Theater for Youth (HTY), new Artistic Director Eric Johnson selected the upcoming season by soliciting advice from staff, board members, teachers, and kids, honing down a list of two hundred plays to find seven slated for 2006–2007. “Contradictory input was actually the most comforting,” he says, “I quickly realized I would never be able to please everyone, and with that came freedom.”

Johnson has ultimate responsibility for season selection, but notes that the theatre has an age-old equation for choosing shows. The theatre considers “the age of audience, touring stipulations, cultural importance, and academic relevance, as well as title, gender appeal, cast size, [a] commitment to new work, design requirements, and the skills of the acting company,” Johnson explains. Season slot requirements can be as specific as “a three-actor play that plays for high school audiences, is academic enough for teachers to book, cool enough for students to fork out \$5 to see, can tour by plane, addresses important social issues, appeals to a multicultural audience and will tour in repertory with a Chinese opera inspired version of *Mulan*,” he says.

Johnson’s challenge is finding material that speaks directly to Hawaii’s unique audience. With distinct communities and cultures on different islands, HTY looks for works that will honor “the variety of experience between someone growing up in an urban Honolulu environment and on a rural neighbor island.”

The theatre’s specific needs often translate into the creation and commission of new work. Next season’s opener, *Snow White*, and the pre-K show, *The Sense-Sational Show*, will be created by HTY with extensive involvement from their education department. Future commissioned works include *Wave Theory*, a piece by Carson Grace Becker “about surfing, oceanography, and the physics of relativity,” *Maui vs. Hercules*, a play by Yokannan Kern “imagining the collision of Hawaiian and Greek mythology,” and *Obake*, a “Kabuki telling of... Japanese-Hawaiian ghost stories” by David

### 2006–2007 SEASON

- Snow White* by Hester Kamin
- Sport* by El Tricicle
- Christmas Talk Story 2006* by local writers
- A Thousand Cranes* by Kathryn Schultz Miller
- The Stones* by Tom Lycos and Stefo Nantsou
- The Sense-Sational Show* by Cynthia See
- The Magical Bird: A Fabulous Filipino Folktale* by Elizabeth Wong

Furumoto. HTY develops new work through a series of readings and workshops, and this year Johnson has added designers to the process.

Much of the new work emerging from or commissioned by the theatre is culturally specific, and Johnson says he sees that as a dramatic asset. The 2005–2006 season opener, *Nothing Is the Same*, chronicles the events of the December 7, 1941 bombings as they affect the lives of four Hawaiian children. Playwright Y York used oral histories collected by the students of an Oahu elementary school through an HTY education department residency in her scripting of the play. This culturally specific drama opened at HTY last fall and traveled to Seattle Children’s Theatre for a successful run. “By focusing down the lens of what we’re looking at, it broadens the

appeal and interest,” Johnson says. “If you look at what’s specific and local about the programming, things that are specific to your community appeal to a mass audience.” Johnson seeks distinct stories that speak to audiences of Hawaii across their diversity. In a place that has had “no ethnic majority for one hundred years,” stories told at Honolulu Theater for Youth attempt to cross cultural boundaries.

—Rachael Miller

Eric Johnson, HTY’s artistic director, was a seventeen-year-old exchange student in Barcelona when he encountered the physical comedy troupe, El Tricicle. The piece he saw them perform struck a chord. “It was the first time I laughed out loud with my host family,” he says. Ten years later Johnson appeared with El Tricicle in their European tour. He obtained the American rights for the piece, retitled it *Sport*, and toured an updated and uniquely American version around mainland United States. Now Johnson is bringing *Sport* to Honolulu Theater for Youth. A new adaptation with a surfing sketch and references to local sports will greet Hawaiian audiences this fall.



*Sport* by El Tricicle. Honolulu Theater for Youth, Honolulu, HI. Image by Brad Goda and Dean Conatay.

## Lexington Children’s Theatre

How do you choose a balanced season? “Lots of discussion!” says Jeremy Kisling, Lexington Children’s Theatre’s (LCT) education director. “The entire staff (associate, artistic, marketing, producing, and education) gives suggestions. We ask for feedback from teachers on our show evaluations to see what they might be interested in seeing on our stage. We take all that information and then match the organizational goals and needs [of the company].”

Like many theatres, LCT wrestles with finding scripts that will attract both school and public audiences. Tying plays to local school curricula and offering education programs that align with Kentucky State Teaching Standards attracts one kind of audience, but LCT wants to widen their audience base to families and the general public. LCT considers a blend of classic and contemporary theatre, cast size, and production resources, while searching for a creative challenge. “Other than the critical factors listed above, it comes down to the artistic team’s taste and desire to produce a specific play,” Kisling says.

In addition to finding texts that fit those critical factors, the theatre looks for plays that serve the region’s youth. “All theatres should know their patrons’ tastes and artistic needs,” says Kisling. “We weigh the cultural and social impact of specific pieces. We love plays that have Kentucky or Appalachian themes or subject matter.”

Many plays produced at LCT are written by in-house artists, mostly for financial reasons. “With budgets being tight, it limits our ability to commission as much as we would like,” Kisling adds. LCT’s last commissioned work was *Witness* by John Urquhart, based on the book by Karen Hesse and developed at the Kennedy Center’s New Visions/New Voices in 2004.

Kisling also articulates the challenges of obtaining rights to scripts. The change of one play in a potential season due to availability of rights can alter the balance of the entire list. Because LCT must consider projected audience, a potential director and cast, omitting one script can modify staff available for the production, the space in which it is performed, and how other scripts are arranged within the year. “This upcoming season changed several times because we couldn’t obtain rights. So we keep returning to the drawing board and keep the discussion flowing until everyone feels good about the choices,” Kisling says.

Finding the perfect season—or the season perfect for a given year—remains a challenge for LCT. Even within the decision-making team the idea of a “dream season” differs. In fact, not one script title appeared on all of the team’s individual lists, though a few surfaced more than once. Those oft-appearing titles? Aurand Harris’ *The Arkansaw Bear*, Suzan Zeder’s *Mother Hicks*, and Laurie Brooks’ *The Match Girl’s Gift*. And while none of those will be produced this season... there’s always next year.

—Sally Vander Gheynst



*Anansi the Spider* by Lexington Children’s Theatre Staff. Lexington Children’s Theatre, Lexington, KY. Artwork by Kellie Lambert.

### 2006–2007 SEASON

- Seussical the Musical* by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty
- Aesop’s Fables on Stage* by Vivian and Larry Snipes
- Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn* adapted by Rita Grauer and John Urquhart and Yellow Brick Road Shows
- Charlotte’s Web* based on the book by E. B. White, adapted by Joseph Robinette
- Cinderella* adapted by Charlotte B. Chorpenning
- A Christmas Carol* based on the book by Charles Dickens, adapted by the LCT Staff
- The Garden of Rikki Tikki Tavi* based on the story by Rudyard Kipling, adapted by Y York
- Anansi the Spider* developed by LCT Staff
- Bridge to Terabithia* based on the book by Katherine Paterson, adapted by Katherine Paterson and Stephanie Tolan
- A Year with Frog and Toad* based on the books by Arnold Lobel, with book and lyrics by Willie Reale and music by Robert Reale

## Metro Theater Company

Metro Theater Company was formed as a touring performance ensemble traveling in a van throughout the St. Louis area. Metro's touring radius expanded quickly to include regional, national, and even international venues. "For most of the first thirty years of Metro's organizational life, we commissioned and/or developed our own original work, exclusively," explains Carol North, Metro's artistic director since 1980. "The life of any given piece in our repertoire ranged from one to five years, depending upon the success of the work in our regional and national touring. During this span, we typically created a new piece every twelve to eighteen months and had two to three pieces in rotating rep."

"Sadly, fewer national presenters are able to stretch beyond the familiar titles now," she says. Touring productions for local schools and libraries need to be "smaller, flexible pieces" which connect to national standards. For example, Metro's current touring production by Jan Lucas, *Long Road to Freedom*, deals with the Underground Railroad and connects to national history standards. But, "it is also a fine piece of theatre," says North, "Layered and multi-dimensional."

North says that plays with the right mix of sensory and emotional qualities with an active dramatic structure appeal to a wide range of ages. "What does it mean to label the age for which a certain play is appropriate?" she asks. "We don't label rooms in an art museum that way, or define who should attend a symphony performance based upon 'age appropriate' repertoire. Much as I resist these labels, it comes with the territory working with schools.

Metro attempts to extend the conversation about a play with schools, helping them think about the experience beyond grade level curriculum expectations."

Metro weighs three important considerations when choosing plays for production: location, creative impact, and audience. "St. Louis is a city of enclaves," explains North. "People don't easily cross their neighborhood boundaries." For this reason, where a performance occurs, and how it is artistically produced and marketed has a large impact on the audience makeup. A core value of Metro Theater Company is to provide access to St. Louis' diverse audiences. Balance is an important part of the season selection process—balance among productions, balance for the artistic ensemble, and balance for a slate of productions that respects and honors

the diversity of the St. Louis audience.

Seven years ago, to better meet their mission, Metro chose to expand beyond their tours and annual week-end of public performances to include a family performance series. They also chose to expand their new work repertoire to include "subsequent productions" of contemporary plays, including Wesley Middleton's *Tomato Plant Girl*, Dennis Foon's *The Short Tree and the Bird That Could Not Sing*, José Cruz González's *Salt & Pepper*, and most recently, Kevin Kling's adaptation of Kevin Henkes's *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*.

However, Metro's affinity for new work and artistic relationships remains the



*Hana's Suitcase*, adapted by Karen Levine from the book by Emil Sher. Co-produced by Metro Theater Company, St. Louis, MO and the Edison Theatre, St. Louis, MO.

In January 2007, Metro Theater Company will produce *Hana's Suitcase* by Emil Sher, based on Karen Levine's book of the same title. The genesis of this story and how it found its way to Metro's season is a story of coincidence, or perhaps fate. At the ASSITEJ Congress in Montréal last September, Metro's Managing Director Joan Briccetti met Sber and they began a conversation about his new play, a Holocaust story set in Japan based on a series of true events.

The story begins with teacher Fumiko Isbioka at the newly opened Holocaust Education and Learning Center for children in Tokyo. In order to support meaningful learning, Isbioka asked established museums to lend artifacts and objects that might help Japanese children better understand the Holocaust. Auschwitz sent an empty suitcase that bore the name and birth date of Hana Brady and the German word "waisenkind" or "orphan." The suitcase so piqued the children's curiosity that Isbioka undertook a quest to find out about Hana Brady. After an exhaustive search, she found Hana's name on a list in a museum in Prague. This, in turn, led to the discovery that Hana's brother, George, was alive and living in Toronto, and to the confirmation that Hana Brady had died in Auschwitz at thirteen years old. This story forms the basis of Sber's play.

Briccetti returned to St. Louis and told Carol North about her conversation with Sber. Soon after Briccetti returned to St. Louis, she received a copy of the book *Hana's Suitcase*. She shared it with Artistic Director Carol North, who was so moved by the story that they requested to see a draft of Sber's play. The two began a long-distance dialogue, while Briccetti launched negotiations to secure performance rights. In April, Briccetti and North journeyed to Toronto to see the play's premiere at the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre and to meet with George Brady and his daughter, Lara. When Metro Theater Company premieres *Hana's Suitcase* in January, George Brady and Fumiko Isbioka will be in the audience.

cornerstone in season selection. Currently North is developing a new adaptation of *Moby Dick* with writer and whale expert, Patricia Corrigan, and is working with Nicholas Kryah's treat-

ment of Eugene Field's poem, *The Duel*. North is also in conversation about a new project with writer and spoken word artist Mariah Richardson. These are the projects that seem to excite North the most. "[If there were no constraints,] I'd call all the writers, directors, musicians, and actors I know and cook up a collaborative stew because that is the most creative, dangerous, important work to do." It's "the stuff that comes up when you don't know where you are going" that appeals most to North and Metro Theater Company.

—Katie Dawson

### 2006–2007 SEASON

*Hana's Suitcase* based on the book by Karen Levine, adapted by Emil Sher

*Kerfafs* by Collen Neuman

*Long Road to Freedom* by Jan Lucas (touring)

*Stix and Stonz* by Nicholas Kryah (touring)

*Beowulf* adapted by Nicholas Kryah (touring)

## Seattle Children's Theatre

How much does the "tyranny of the known title" factor into balancing a season? As Kevin Maifeld, managing director, explains: "Seattle Children's Theatre's 2006–2007 season, for instance, includes six adaptations. A well-known book title sells itself [and] as most children's theatres have limited marketing budgets. We look for the title that will sell on name recognition." SCT's 2006–2007 season attests to the need for name recognition with six adaptations.

Maifeld says balancing the budget remains SCT's biggest challenge in selecting their season. Without that constraint, he admits he'd choose "large-scale musicals with elaborate sets and costumes, cutting-edge work for teens, and more week-long development workshops on new scripts." The season selection process begins with Artistic Director Linda Hartzell choosing scripts for senior managers to consider. They join the managing director and production manager to read and discuss the pros and cons of each script including target age, proposed time of year, and gender of the protagonist. In considering target age, SCT strives to produce three shows for children five and older, three shows for children eight and older, and one show for teens each season. SCT also tries to produce more serious work in winter and musicals in the spring and avoids titles being done or recently done at other Seattle theatres. After proposed scripts are thoroughly reviewed, senior managers run budgets and project incomes. Maifeld says all the "tough conversations" surround SCT's ability to afford their proposed season. Disagreements over season selection are resolved by "producing multiple

versions of the budget until [they] find one where everyone can agree to the assumptions for ticket sales and contributed income." Finally, senior managers present the proposed season to the board for approval.

Even taking into account the necessity of producing plays with name recognition, SCT is committed to new script development with ten new scripts currently in the works. According to Maifeld, the theatre's commitment is further illustrated by the fact that they produce 94% of all the plays they commission.

—April Gentry-Sutterfield



*The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Oyamo, music by Carman Moore. Seattle Children's Theatre, Seattle, WA. Artwork by Jeff James.

Seattle Children's Theatre adds live music to the stage with their production of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, a show chosen to remind young people of the role of mentors and elders in their lives. The play tells an ancient story that most people think they know from Disney's *Fantasia*, yet few young people know its real meaning—learning from those wiser than we are and carrying those lessons forward to subsequent generations. Playwright Oyamo will create the script, with music by New York composer Carman Moore and choreography from Donald McKayle. This musical for all ages has been in development for three years and the story evolved considerably from its beginnings. It is now set in the late 1800s in Creole Louisiana with colorful characters and songs. Live music replaces the past practices of using recorded music or a single piano to save money. A jazz combo will grace the stage to round out the sound.

### 2006–2007 SEASON

*Harriet's Halloween Candy* based on the book by Nancy Carlson, script by Ann Schulman, music and lyrics by Chad Henry

*Jason and the Golden Fleece* by John Olive

*The Sorcerer's Apprentice* by Oyamo

*Goodnight Moon* based on the book by Margaret Wise Brown; script, music, and lyrics by Chad Henry

*Afternoon of the Elves* based on the book by Janet Taylor Lisle, adapted by Y York

*Everyone Knows What a Dragon Looks Like* based on the book by Jay Williams, adapted by Bret Fetzer

*Addy: An American Girl Story* based on the books by Connie Porter, adapted by Cheryl L. West

# Stage One: The Louisville Children's Theatre

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare. Stage One: The Louisville Children's Theatre, Louisville, KY. Artwork by Jason McKnight.



Following Bill Clinton's blowout election in 1992, political strategist James Carville explained his candidate's success bluntly: "It's the economy, stupid." In TYA, some might argue a different mantra: "It's the schools, stupid." For J. Daniel Herring, artistic director of Stage One in Louisville, KY, this mantra takes center stage when considering a new season.

Herring chooses Stage One's season. Throughout the process, he seeks feedback from staff "regarding connections for public and school audiences" and seeks plays that have proven themselves "successful as well as meaningful at sister theatres." Stage One merged with Kentucky Center for the Arts in 1995, and this relationship provides the company with the support of an umbrella organization while serving KCA through its educational programming. The community serves a vital role, as Stage One serves education-based audiences through outreach and its season selection. "Our community is extremely important," Herring says. "The diversity of cultures, the celebration of events and famous figures have all been, at some point in time, contributing factors in season planning."

Herring considers several critical elements, including artistic integrity, when choosing plays for a new season. He takes into account the writing quality of the script, the challenge it will pose for audiences and artists and how the themes tie into the school curriculum and public

(parental) interest. Herring describes this last consideration as "very important." As the necessity to link education to extracurricular activities increases, Stage One meets this need by providing study guides with links to applicable Kentucky education standards. In an effort to reach out to varied school-age audiences, Herring seeks scripts for students ranging from preschool to high school, and says balancing the season is of utmost importance. "Age group, themes, gender of protagonist, diversity, adaptation, and original work . . .

I try to have each of the plays in our season address at least two or more of these categories."

The challenge is "[Selecting] plays that can work in a repertory situation where comparability is important," as well as finding "the balance of title recognition." The plays that meet those standards rise to the top and become the announced season.

—Spencer Sutterfield

## 2006–2007 SEASON

*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* based on the book by Lewis Carroll, adapted by Deborah Lynn Frockt

*The Death and Life of Sherlock Holmes* by Suzan Zeder

*Narnia* based on *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis, book by Jules Tasca, music by Thomas Tierney, lyrics by Ted Drachman

*Miss Nelson Has a Field Day* based on the book by Harry Allard and James Marshall, adapted by Joan Cushing

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare

*If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* based on the book by Laura Numeroff, adapted by Jody Davidson

*Katie Dawson is currently adjunct professor and coordinator of the Imagine Safer Schools professional development program for the University of Texas at Austin.*

*Sally Vander Gbeynst is a second year M.F.A. candidate and serves as Education Director for UT Connections Youth Theatre.*

*Lauren Kane is a second year M.F.A. candidate and works with the Imagine Safer Schools program at the University of Texas at Austin.*

*Nat Miller is a second year M.F.A. candidate with a special interest in creative drama and directing.*

*Rachael Miller is a teaching artist and M.F.A. candidate. She facilitates Age to Age, a program in Austin, TX that bridges senior citizen volunteers and school communities through the arts.*

*Sarah Rinner currently works for Theatre Action Project in Austin and co-directs a peer theatre company in Victoria, TX.*

*April Gentry-Sutterfield is a third year M.F.A. candidate and co-founder of UT Connections, the University of Texas at Austin's resident youth theatre.*

*Spencer Sutterfield is a certified theatre instructor from Arkansas. His thesis work explores dyslexia with youth through performance.*

*Stage One takes on A Midsummer Night's Dream for their sixtieth anniversary season to give the company the challenging opportunity to work on a Shakespearean play. According to Artistic Director J. Daniel Herring, young audiences deal with Shakespeare as part of their education and most of them think they don't like or understand Shakespeare. Stage One has always wanted to do a production that builds a bridge between their young adult audience and the Bard. To combat the obstacles many students have with Shakespeare, this production will blend history and contemporary audiences together. Students, chosen through teachers' recommendations, will have the opportunity to be on the Stage One Director's Council. They will attend play rehearsals to gain hands-on knowledge of play production, and will select contemporary music for transitions in the play, reflecting today's culture, to provide the connection between Elizabethan theatre and students' personal experiences. The transitional music will reflect how the themes in Shakespeare's writing are applicable today as teens grapple with exploring relationships, challenging authority, and dealing with issues such as bullying, quarreling and making up with boyfriends, girlfriends, and their families. The production design of this show will also be blended—the set and costumes will reflect the style of the Elizabethan period but will be constructed from architecturally modern materials.*