

Uncommon Collaborations:

Unique Partnerships in TYA

By Ernie Nolan

Some of the most popular and memorable plays for young audiences bring to life surprising partnerships—enterprises shared by individuals from different worlds. Part of the fun in experiencing a play like *The BFG*, is watching the friendship between Sophie, the human, and the Big Friendly Giant develop as they save the children of England from being eaten. And who can forget when Templeton, a cantankerous rat, finally agrees to join Charlotte's plan to save Wilbur the pig in *Charlotte's Web*? Is there a dry eye in the house when Gertrude McFuzz, a bird, offers to raise the new hatchling with Horton the elephant in *Seussical*?

While partnerships like these are occurring onstage, they're also happening behind the scenes. Theatres, teaming with unexpected partners, are in the process of changing the way they reach their audiences. Here, we look at four TYA companies who have joined with some unconventional partners to extend each organization's mission beyond their buildings' walls and affect the future of how artists in the young audience field view partnering.



(L-R) Justin Moyer and Sophia Nielsen in *If* by Michael Rohd and Rodolfo Ortega. Kaiser Permanente's Educational Theatre Program in collaboration with Oregon Children's Theatre, Portland, OR. Photo by Sharon O'Keefe.

OREGON CHILDREN'S THEATRE AND KAISER PERMANENTE

For Oregon Children's Theatre (OCT) and Kaiser Permanente, collaboration first started with an invitation from the nonprofit group practice health care organization, which serves 8.2 million members. Investing in educational theatre since the mid 1980s, Kaiser hoped to revive previously cut health-centered theatre programs that once reached the Portland area. Remembering OCT Artistic Director Stan Foote's involvement twenty years ago as an actor in Kaiser's touring production of *Professor Bodywise's Traveling Menagerie*, Nancy Stevens, director of community benefits and health for Kaiser's Northwest Region, contacted the theatre to see if a project could ignite.

"Kaiser wanted to do educational theatre and we do that very, very well," says OCT Artistic Director Stan Foote, "As opposed to them reinventing the wheel, why not find someone who does it well?" With annual audiences of more than 70,000 children and deep roots in the community and area schools, OCT seemed to be the perfect collaborator for Kaiser to reach student audiences. Both set out together to develop works that would travel to schools during the 2006–2007 school year and raise questions about eating habits, inactivity, social conflict, and intolerance. "I had been dying to have an outreach show that you weren't fumbling to find a partner [for]," Foote said. "This is exactly what we were looking for."

Now in their first year of what Foote calls "a true collaboration," OCT and Kaiser are sending out productions targeted at fourth grade through high school students, with a special emphasis on the middle school grades. "Students at that age can't imagine developing diabetes," says OCT Educational Theatre Program Manager Laura Faye Smith. "When you are twelve to fourteen you are not thinking about your mortality." The first produc-

tion of the pilot phase is *What Would You Do?*, an interactive play developed by Kaiser and originally delivered to Colorado public schools. "Instead of saying, 'You need to eat five carrots a day!' we're trying to help students establish a model of thinking [where] the choices you make as a young person effect you down the road," Foote explains. The play, performed by professional actors, uses stop-action sequences that prompt audience feedback. Smith adds, "We're using theatre as a medium. Students are not able to passively watch the show. They are an active part."

The second and most adventurous production of the pilot phase is *If*, an original musical to be performed by students for students, written by Michael Rohd, with music by Rodolfo Ortega. The process started with a physician advisory group from Kaiser first determining the message of this new work. They came up with the themes of choice, vision, and leadership—"as in 'have a vision of what you want your health to be in fifteen years, make choices to support that vision, and be a leader about helping other people understand those choices,'" Smith says. In order to get a true youth perspective, Rohd and Ortega workshopped their piece with OCT's Young Professionals, a dedicated group of advanced acting students ages twelve and up. Representatives from OCT also visited area classrooms and talked with students. "We asked, 'What is the best thing you could see in a show like this? What is the worst thing?'" Smith recounts. "The worst thing they said was seeing singing and dancing vegetables. They also thought it would be cool if someone died." Feedback, like the idea of a character dealing with death, was then incorporated into the new work. Slated to be performed in five area middle schools starting in January 2007, *If* will be staged by two instructors in the hosting schools every day after school over a period of two weeks. Then on the final Friday, performances will take place for the student body of the school, incoming students from feeder schools, as well as family and friends.

After this pilot year, OCT intends to continue to develop at least one new show a year on new topics that are determined by their new collaborator, Kaiser Permanente. Foote hopes to attract artists of national caliber to work on projects that are on the cutting edge of the way young people think. "It's our goal to stimulate learning," Foote said. "We trust that children are thinking human beings. If we ask the right questions, they will come up with great answers."

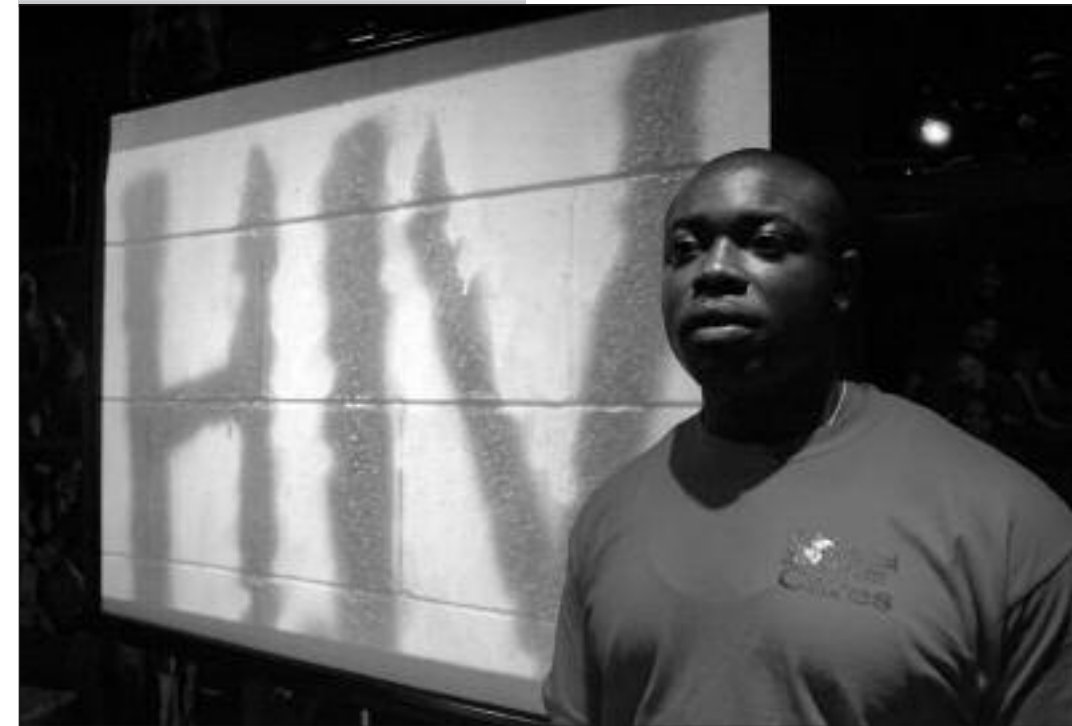
THE COTERIE THEATRE, UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI, KANSAS CITY (UMKC), AND KANSAS UNIVERSITY

In Kansas City, MO, a young African American woman is also searching for answers. She stands in front of a classroom of high school students talking about AIDS. "Did I get this from having sex? But I only had sex once. Is that all it takes? Should I have stopped it by using a condom? Will I get very sick?" The answer, "YES," looms behind her on a large screen. While the students in the room believe she is a teen living with AIDS, the young woman is actually a medical student from the University of Missouri, Kansas City (UMKC) and an actor in the Dramatic AIDS Education Project (DAEP), a collaborative venture between The Coterie Theatre and the Schools of Medicine at UMKC and Kansas University (KU).

For thirteen years, presentations like this one, given in everywhere from public high schools to high security lockdowns, have helped educate students in the metropolitan Kansas City area on AIDS and STDs. In 1992, Jeff Church, artistic director of The Coterie, and Joette Pelster, executive director, were invited to see a class project on AIDS presented by two KU medical students. "As a youth theatre we were interested in AIDS education, but found it difficult to do it by ourselves because we lacked legitimacy in the schools," Pelster said. The unique mix of medical information and theatre that they witnessed inspired a collaboration between KU faculty member Dr. Christine Moranetz and The Coterie. "Joette and I wanted to create excellent artistic outreach that complemented The Coterie's mission of breaking down barriers between races, sexes, and generations," Church said. "We wanted to break down the stereotype that AIDS is a gay disease." Playwright Lisa Cordes was brought on board to develop monologues based on the stories of real-life teens with HIV.

Cordes and The Coterie developed seven monologues in an almost documentary/realistic style to represent the diverse ethnic makeup of the Kansas City area: Caucasian male and female, Latino male and Latina female, African American male and female, and Asian female. "Right now we have eighteen teams of two that fan out throughout Kansas City with performances free of charge," explains Church. Funds from the American Century Companies Foundation, Heart of America Community AIDS Partnership/DIFFA, and the AIDS Service Foundation help deliver the program free of charge each year. Each DAEP team always consists of one male and one female, one a professional actor and the other a medical student. One of the members of the pairing also always represents the ethnic majority of the host school or facility. "The objective is for everyone who's watching the presentation to have someone they can identify with," Pelster said.

Church describes the DAEP presentations as "guerilla theatre." Students who see the monologues are not told they are seeing a play. Instead, the actors present their stories, accompanied by slides and



Nick Laden in *Dramatic AIDS Education Project (DAEP)*. Coterie Theatre, Kansas City, MO. Photo by John Billings.

music, in a format designed to make the students believe they are watching a first-person account of an experience, not actors performing monologues. After each actor performs, they reveal their true identities. The presenters then transition into an hour-long question and answer session with the audience. "This is where the training that everyone goes through is so important. You can't give out any misinformation," Church said. A balanced message of protected sex and abstinence is given in both portions of the program. "By presenting a balanced message, we're bucking the stereotype of liberal artists pushing protected sex," he adds.

Before giving presentations, the actors and medical students chosen for DAEP go through training in both acting and AIDS education. Dr. Moranetz, now of UMKC, holds an intense three-day training session in AIDS education. "Our partnership with the medical schools helps us to complement each other's strengths," Pelster says. "The medical school brings legitimacy, while we bring the creativity that gets students' attention." After training, every member of DAEP then must pass an acting dress rehearsal and Q&A session with the trainers that includes Moranetz, Pelster, Church, Coterie Education Director Nancy Marcy, and DAEP Co-Director Michael Smith, an eight-year veteran of the program.

Coterie Booking Coordinator Annette Fillipi recounts an anecdote that proves the extensive training the DAEP teams receive: "A team had presentations in a Kansas City suburb about thirty miles away on a potentially snowy day. The first presentation went wonderfully until the school decided to release early

as snowfall was increasing rather dramatically. Our presenters loaded up the equipment and headed back to the theatre only to inch along the interstate in the snowstorm for almost three hours (a trip that normally would take thirty to forty minutes). With plenty of time to spare, the team turned on the car radio to find a local DJ talking about STDs—with incorrect information. One of our troupe members called in to kindly (and anonymously) correct him on air and made good use of their travel time."

Reaching thousands of students each year, DAEP has proven to make a difference in the community. "The program has proven to increase knowledge of HIV and has been effective in changing attitudes toward people living with HIV," Moranetz said. "Students also indicate better intentions to reduce high-risk behavior after these presentations." Church says the project has been beneficial for the theatre. "This project has certainly made us a different kind of children's theatre."

CHARLOTTE CHILDREN'S THEATRE AND THE CHARLOTTE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Visiting downtown Charlotte, NC you're sure to come across another different kind of children's theatre. But is it a theatre? Is it a library? Is it a theme park? "It" is *ImaginOn: The Joe and Joan Martin Center*, a 102,000 square foot joint facility shared by the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County (PLCMC) and Children's Theatre of Charlotte (CTC), which opened its doors on October 8, 2005.

Occupying an entire city block, ImaginOn is part of Charlotte's budding cultural district, which includes the Main Library, the Levine Museum of the New South, the Afro-American Cultural Center, Discovery Place, the North Carolina Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, the Mint Museum of Craft and Design, the McColl Center for Visual Arts, and Sprint Square. This partnership, the first of its kind between a public library and a major professional children's theatre, marries public and private worlds into a new and untested kind of public service.

"In 1997, both institutions were doing long range planning," explains Children's Theatre of Charlotte Executive Director Bruce LaRowe. "At the time we were in an old VFW club. I read an article that the library was looking for a building with an auditorium and classroom. Both of us had moved beyond our space capacity. I thought, 'Let's explore what this could be.' We're both fundamentally about telling stories." For PLCMC, collaboration with CTC not only gave them a financial partner but also a way to meet what The Institute of Museum and Library Services calls "the challenges of the twenty-first century learner." The institute encourages libraries to become part of a network of learning resources that share a common educational mission, like the programming of CTC which strives to give young people ages three to eighteen high quality theatre and education classes.

The \$36.2 million facility, which is owned by the PLCMC, was funded primarily through voter-approved bonds and additional county appropriations. They created a plan whereby the building would be a branch of the library, but CTC and PLCMC would be 50/50 partners on the financial aspects of its day-to-day existence. Over the seven years of development, staff and board members of both organizations actively participated in planning and designing ImaginOn. During the last two years, a core team of five CTC and five PLCMC staff members met monthly to work on integration issues like marketing/branding, space usage, special programming opportunities, and shared hardware and software needs. "We talked and dreamed, created a vision and mission, wrangled over parts of our separate cultures that we could not comprehend, and celebrated the awe we felt at being involved in such a unique project," remembers Literary Manager Lucy Hazlehurst.

"Our greatest fear, a fear often unspoken but ever present through all our conversations, was that by entering into this partnership we would somehow lose what made each organization within the partnership special," Hazlehurst said. "To quell this fear we asked ourselves this question: What makes our individual organization unique and what about it will continue and not get lost in the partnership?" The two teams wrote their answers on slips of paper. When the answers were shared, "the very things that we were most fearful of losing were the things that brought us together to begin with," she said. The answers were then sealed in envelopes and tied together with a ribbon, symbolizing the individuals within the new partnership.

In addition to the donuts that the library staff gets to enjoy on CTC show mornings, the benefits of the year-old shared space seem endless. "From my perspective," said Library Manager Lois Kilkka, "It has been invaluable to me to work collaboratively with CTC's Executive Director. I can observe and expand my management toolkit by working side by side with a seasoned executive from a different, but allied field. Working up-close but non-competitively with a partner, I see other ways of handling delegation, staff communication, strategic planning, and budgeting."

Program Coordinator Melanie Perlman Baron, a shared staff member between the library and CTC adds, "I think the most important thing about this partnership, and the one that grows every day, is the occurrence of accidental cross-inspiration. We think about new ways of doing what we do because we are observing each other working in ways that are second nature to one organization but a new language to the other. And we are, together, developing a third language that is unique to ImaginOn."

An example of cross-inspiration is one of the programming highlights of this holiday season, activities and performances planned around Robert Inman's *Christmas Bus*. "Teams are always talking about enhancing what both organizations are doing," LaRowe said. "While CTC produces *Christmas Bus*, the author will be in residence. The book was originally published through the publishing arm of the library. Talkbacks with the author and activities are planned in the library. Either institution might have done something on a smaller scale, but this became

part of ImaginOn's page to stage program." The programs planned include exhibits; hands on activities for young people to create their own books; pod casts; and musical performances in the lobby.

But the benefits don't end with administrative or programming perks. "When ImaginOn visitors stop at the box office on a dark day to ask what we have on today (and the short answer is 'nothing'), we can refer them to the library and all their wonderful treasures," adds Box Office Associate Frances Schoonder. "Of course, we ask if they can come back on the weekend and cross-sell them on tickets to the spectacularly delightful productions they won't want to miss. It's rare that a visitor leaves feeling like we didn't have something to make their visit rewarding." Over 420,000 visitors in ImaginOn's first year have enjoyed such attractions as The Story Lab, a computer work room where students can write stories individually or in teams; The Teen Loft, a 4,000 square foot space that feels like an upscale coffee bar where teens can read and work; Studio I, a video studio that lets teens produce live-action and animated videos using the latest technology; and displays of props and costumes of past CTC productions.

In the future, ImaginOn hopes to "transform theatre for youth," said LaRowe. "This is now more than coming to a class or a show. It's about the experience. Taking that and extending it. Interaction is more compelling and impactful than it's ever been."

ORLANDO REPERTORY THEATRE AND UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

Orlando Repertory Theatre (The REP) in Florida is also creating new experiences for not only audiences, but for the next generation of TYA artists as well. Created in 2000 as a merger between the University of Central Florida (UCF) and the Civic Theatre of Central Florida, The REP offers a six-show season in addition to the opportunity for higher education students to receive a Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) in Theatre for Young Audiences from UCF. Housed literally inside the theatre, the graduate program is highly selective, taking only six to eight students per year. "There is a real intimacy in the program," said Sybil St. Claire, UCF faculty member at The REP. "We are careful to select students who will not only thrive in, but contribute to an environment of generosity, compassion, and community." The curriculum also changes along with the demands of The REP season, building a bridge between educational and professional. "What we wanted to provide our students with was a state of the art theatre education filtered through the lens of TYA," St. Claire said. "So, while they are learning about Chorpennig, Ward, and Zeder they are also learning about Meisner, Linklater, and Bogart. On top of all this, we sprinkled in some fantastic electives like puppetry and a course in creativity inspired by Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*."

"Our grads are learning, in a total immersion environment, not only how a professional theatre is run in theory, but how to run a professional theatre in reality,"

she said. During their coursework, M.F.A. students can expect to find themselves working in the costume and scene shops, selling tickets in the box office, working with the education department on field trips, spending time in the development office, engaging community involvement, and also teaching in The REP's Youth Academy. "They try to fit our individual goals with the needs of the theatre," said Nick Bazzo, a first-year student in the program. "For instance, this semester I learned how to write grants in our development office and next semester I'm assistant-directing one of the professional productions. We also have the opportunity to audition for or teach in all The REP's productions/programs."

Opportunities like these make the partnership stand out when compared to classroom-only programs. It's designed to cultivate both the educator and the artist, says St. Claire. "We went with an inclusive approach that embraced the whole TYA practitioner," she said. "I have often described theatre for young audiences as more of a diversification than a specialization. Anyone who has spent any time in the field knows there are going to be days, if not years, wherein you are the playwright, the director, the grant writer, the set designer, the liaison to the board, the boo-boo kisser, and the toilet bowl cleaner."

Students and administration both recognize the rewards of the partnership. "We view ourselves as part of The REP family," Bazzo said. "They are supportive of the TYA program and we of them. The combination creates a positive and real-world learning environment for us all." The REP's Executive Director Paul Lartonoix adds, "It's about practical experience. In our partnership with the university, we're looking for things that venture into the practical. When students come to The REP they see there's a marketing person, a budget person. This is definitely different from what happens on campus. Campus life is about the artistic. They don't have to worry about ticket sales. Ticket sales are what keep us alive. It's an important lesson to learn. Students see we have to pay the phone bill." Lartonoix is excited to share plans for the M.F.A. students to make an even bigger impact. "We're in the planning stage of having an M.F.A. show series all on its own," he said. "It would be a professional theatre handing over its black box. They could then focus on the kind of theatre that doesn't have a name, the kind that would be hard to sell to the Orlando community. Eventually, these pieces would become part of the mainstage season."

It's not only the students who continue to benefit from the partnership. "Sure, there's a financial value," Lartonoix said. "But our partnership with the university adds all kinds of positives. The M.F.A. faculty is in house. We wouldn't have access to as many talented faculty and directors otherwise. The research and dramaturgical work we couldn't afford as staff." Also an advantage, the M.F.A. program blends students and faculty with formal TYA training with artists from The REP who often have different theatre backgrounds.

The symbiotic relationship between The REP and

(L-R) Meghann Henry, Amanda Wolgast, Amanda Rowell, and Shawn Rice in *Writes of Spring: Journeys* compiled by UCF TYA students. Orlando Repertory Theatre, Orlando, FL. Photo by Rozz Grigsby.



the M.F.A. program doesn't only end with staff benefits. A program like the Writes of Spring Festival, a writing contest for K-12 students, is sponsored by The REP, but run by the M.F.A. students. Orlando area students are asked to submit poems, essays, and stories based on a topic. (This year's is "What would you do if you were not afraid?"). The winning submissions of various age levels are adapted for the stage with as little change to the original text as possible. The students who submit their work are then invited to see a performance of their writings at The REP. The M.F.A. students not only judge the contest, but also produce, write, direct, and perform in it as well.

Lartonoix is also quick to point out though that there are two different institutions partnering and benefiting each other. "We are a professional theatre on our own, but with ties to the university. At first, people assumed that the university ran The REP. The university has its own offices and theatres on campus, a place of its own. The REP has its own staff. The identities are clear." The personnel of The REP includes an education director, development director, technical director, marketing manager, other resident theatre staff, and two faculty members from the University of Central Florida, St. Claire and Dr. Megan Alrutz (who is, in the spirit of full disclosure, a managing editor of *TYA Today*).

But it isn't all about business; The REP strives to inspire new connections between children, adults, parents, and educators through the shared experience

of art and literature as theatre. Besides hosting the three-year M.F.A. program, The REP offers a professional season of plays, classes, camps, outreach, and performance opportunities for young people. And UCF's M.F.A. students are involved in it all. "We're growing quickly. Our reputation is starting to get out there. We think we're going to be a leader in Theatre for Young Audiences. The strength that comes with the university helps," Lartonoix said.

Like the stories these theatres present on their stages, each of these collaborations is unique. Each collaborative effort blends art and education together affecting their audience beyond a single experience. These theatres and their partners hope to instill new ways for not only young people to think, but the TYA field as well. Taking inspiration from Oregon Children's Theatre's *If*, maybe we all need to ask ourselves:

"If tomorrow was yours to make anything you want your life to be
If tomorrow is yours to write
What's the story that you want to see?" ■

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