

THEATER

Show biz for the Cookies-and-Milk Set

Syracuse Children's Theatre

by SARAH PYE

Twenty minutes to show time.

Backstage at the Civic Center's Carrier Theater buzzes with the kind of excitement only a group of 4- to 12-year-olds can produce. Kids hop in and out of doorways, searching frantically for misplaced props, lost bits of costume and the perfect shade of glittery lip-gloss.

Four-year-old Sam Carafa, however, plays happily on the floor in an out-of-the-way corner. He has bigger things on his mind.

"I'm Terrance the Tractor! BZZZZZ – woo woo!"

Sam is one of the littlest performers about to take the stage in Syracuse Children's Theatre's presentation of "A Fairy Tale Evening," a musical showcase of the singing, dancing and acting talents of more than 75 area children.

Although in these tense pre-show moments Sam seems more engrossed with the orange toy tractor he clutches in his small fist than in the upcoming performance, entreaties to give his lines another run do not go unanswered.

"Wwwaaaaaaoooooo," Sam intones dramatically. It's spot on, too, for Sam will play a whale in that night's "The Little Mermaid" sketch.

SCT Director of Dance Jason Bumpus pops his head into the dressing room, encouraging the performers to settle down. It's almost time for their big moment in the spotlight.

As the largest Syracuse-area performing arts organization specializing in classes for children, Syracuse Children's Theatre gives about 1,000 local youths a chance to take the stage each year. Since 1999, SCT, a non-profit organization, has offered singing, dancing and acting classes to children ages 4 to 18 of all ability levels. This summer, SCT offered a four-week class for younger children in July that culminated in the "Fairy Tale Evening." In August, two-week intensive classes ended in performances of "Grease," "101 Dalmatians" and "Big." During the remainder of the year, the organization offers a wide variety of classes coinciding with the school calendar.

Though some of the young performers say SCT classes are just a fun way to fill their free time, others have loftier goals.

"I want to be an actress when I grow up," said 12-year-old Chloe Leibrick, who played the ever-so-slightly schizophrenic Red and White Queen in the "Fairy Tale Evening" segment, "Alice and Wonderland."

Chloe, who has been acting for about a year and a half, said her participation in several SCT shows has prompted her to set her sights on a career on Broadway and in the movies. Her mother, Beth Leibrick, said that's just fine.

"I'm just so excited that she found her passion," Beth said, adding that she thinks Chloe's participation in SCT has been nothing but positive.

"They really stress confidence building," Beth said. "The kids get to be friends with everyone and appreciate everyone's contribution."

One of the greatest benefits of participating in SCT programs is that such activities encourage children to become more creative, thoughtful people, according to Laura Reeder. Reeder serves as executive director of Syracuse's Partners for Arts Education, an organization that funds teaching in the arts.

"All the arts help us create a new generation of thinkers," Reeder said.

According to 11-year-old Malcolm McLachlan, who played the Cook in "Alice in Wonderland," SCT provides him an opportunity to meet new friends.



Photo by Sarah Pye

Royals and the Rabbit. Syracuse Children's Theatre cast members wait backstage at rehearsal for "A Fairy Tale Evening."



Photo by Sarah Pye

Chloe Leibrick, sings "Off With His Head" in her role as the two-faced Red and White Queen in Alice in Wonderland.

"It's a way I get to be crazy," McLachlan said. "I'm a humorous guy – that's what my friends say." Kara Gantos, 9, appeared as a farmer in the "Beauty and the Beast" segment of "A Fairy Tale Evening." She said she wants to share the fun she has at SCT with other kids.

"I've been trying to get some of my friends to do it with me," she said, adding that one of her favorite aspects of performing is having her parents in the audience.

According to SCT Coordinator of Grants and Outreach Jenny Dombroske, the organization's teachers are one reason many children return to SCT classes time and again. Dance teacher Jason Bumpus is a particular favorite with some of the children.

"Jason's not afraid to say something if you do it wrong," said 11-year-old Jordan Perrone, who played Alice in "Alice in Wonderland."

"I learn from my mistakes. If I do a wrong dance move, he'll just tell me, and I'll fix it."

Bumpus said he enjoys working with children because, unlike some adults, they don't treat performing like work.

"With kids, you get this look from them when they didn't get it right. And when the light bulb pops on they get this look of surprise," Bumpus said. "They keep me young."

Dombroske said part of SCT's mission is to bring performance opportunities to all interested children in the Syracuse region, not just those who can afford the tuition fees, which range from about \$150 to \$400.

"Our staff is committed to excellence, and the equal opportunity of children from across our region to gain from the benefits of participation in the arts," Dombroske said.

To that end, SCT offers a number of outreach programs targeted at underserved populations. This fall the organization brings classes to after-school programs at four Syracuse elementary and middle schools, instructing interested students at no charge to participants. Three of these schools pay SCT for these services.

SCT also provides some scholarships for individual students who have demonstrated interest in participating in SCT's regular classes.

"We believe all children benefit from education in the arts, and no one should be neglected due to their financial situation," Dombroske said. But some parents say they find SCT tuition costs prohibitive.

"The cost limits how many classes we participate in," said Holly Olmstead, whose 6-year-old son Eric played Sting Kay (a stingray) in "A Fairy Tale Evening's" "The Little Mermaid." "If the cost was lower, we would participate more."

However, Olmstead said she is very happy with the experience her son has had in SCT classes.

"I can't speak highly enough of Syracuse Children's Theatre," she said, citing the direct benefits of the classes on her son, whom she also home-schools.

"He's learning to cooperate in a group," she said. "He's gaining self-confidence being on stage. And for him, for the most part, it's just fun." ■

Sarah Pye earned degrees in journalism and public relations from Pepperdine University, where she edited the student newspaper and magazine. She spent three summers working at California Musical Theatre.