

Markham actor teaches theatre to kids

This is the first of a series on theatre for youth in the Markham area. "My ten-year old daughter (or son) is pestering me for acting lessons or to join a theatre group. What can you suggest?"

Theatre contacts listed with Information Markham have received dozens of calls along those lines in the past few years. Until now the answer has had to be: "Regrettably, nothing."

Now there is something. Several options are open to young people with a theatrical bent. One is the acting classes just instituted by a local man who recognized the need for them in the Markham area.

Working actor

John Kozak is a professional actor, director and producer. Currently at work on Alan Alda's latest film A New Life, now shooting in Toronto and New York, he is fresh from the four-month run of the highly acclaimed musical Company, at Toronto's CentreStage and the National Arts Centre in Ottawa.

A longtime, award-winning member of Markham Little Theatre, Kozak last appeared with them in the Dining Room a year ago. His other recent roles on the professional stage were the father in Brighton Beach Memoirs and Mushnik in the marvellously entertaining Little Shop of Horrors last summer. He is a veteran of several TV shows and commercials and is a regular on CBC's Wayne and Shuster specials.

Why would such a busy actor be interested in teaching his skills to children? The father of two teen-aged sons enjoys working with young people and considers theatre an important part of their education. "It's always been in the back of my mind," he says. "Back in the days when I used to be more involved with Markham Little Theatre, I did run an acting class for children and a few adults in the upper rooms of the Old Town Hall."

"But then I started getting busier professionally, and without another instructor to spell me, I couldn't continue. MLT wanted to get involved with children's theatre, but time was a problem. Members had just enough to spare for the season's productions."

School in a barn

In the wake of phone calls from interested parents over the past three years, came a call from Sharon Russell of Lifetime Learning Inc., which launched him on his new enterprise. Lifetime Learning is a recreational school of art and music, founded by Russell and her partner, Lynn Howarth. Housed in an old barn on Leitchcroft Farm on Highway 7, just west of Leslie Street, the school also runs a summer camp and recently added computer reading to its curriculum.

They offer three 14-week courses in theatre arts. The first, for young children aged 4 to 6, is in puppetry. It is designed to stimulate imaginations and encourage self-expression.

In creating their own puppets to act out stories, his young pupils must visualize the way their characters look, thereby gaining insight into the importance of costume and make-up in character development.

The two courses in theatre basics, one for ages 7 to 11, the other 12 to 16, are similar in content but differ in complexity and depth. Voice and movement exercises, improvisations, acting techniques, mime and script work will be combined with art and music as it applies to theatre. Make-up, costume, lighting and

set design will be studied because, Kozak maintains, "All the best actors understand the other disciplines that get them on that stage."

Theatre emphasis

Each of the two theatre classes will culminate in the performance of a one-act play for parents and relatives. And Kozak stresses that the emphasis is on theatre: "We're not preparing anyone's child to become a TV star."

Instead, he hopes to foster



John Kozak

knowledge and love of theatre that will encourage students to take theatre arts courses in high school. Geoff Young, of Unionville High's drama department, has expressed enthusiasm for his program.

Kozak will alternate instruction with an assistant, Adam Furfaro, who, he says, "gets along well

with kids." A recent graduate in drama of the University of Windsor's School of Fine Arts, Furfaro played Kozak's son Stanley in Brighton Beach Memoirs at the now-defunct Variety Dinner Theatre. Eventually they hope to add another two instructors to the staff.

Barn to theatre

Plans are also afoot to convert the Leitchcroft barn into a fully-equipped, 130-seat theatre in the new year, providing a home base for Theatre 48 productions, of which Kozak is founder and artistic director. Its production of The Valiant Tailor at the Markham Theatre last Christmas drew rave reviews from critics and audience alike.

In co-operation with Lifetime Learning, Theatre 48 hopes to mount a season of children's theatre each year. Since "training was always a part of Theatre 48's mandate," students from the school will have the opportunity of working with professionals and other seasoned actors, both backstage and onstage.

Community access

Kozak, who will combine the roles of artistic director and general manager of the new theatre, also sees it as a more accessible alternate space to the Markham Theatre for other community groups. If all goes well, it will be in operation by the spring of '88.

Not expensive

The response to the new theatre school has been good, with more than 30 students registered in the

program. Most come from special schools like Montessori and are "very bright and imaginative." Kozak isn't sure why more students from the public school system haven't registered. "I don't think it's the dollars," he says, "because it's not that expensive. Probably parents don't know of a

child's bent in that area because the child hasn't yet expressed an interest in acting."

With the theatre courses having begun just last week and the puppetry class yesterday, openings are still available. Interested parents may call Lifetime Learning Inc. at 764-2579.

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2. Babies must be a resident of Markham or Whitchurch-Scoutville, (area bounded by Yonge on the west, Steeles on the south & Markham/Pickering Townline on the east)
3. Limited number of entries accepted.
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OCTOBER 1, 2, 3, 4, 1987

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