

## Start the Magic! Introducing Kids to Theatre

By Barbara Roy, Family Times  
November-December 2010

Never taken your child to a live theatrical performance? To quote Willie Wonka, "Come with me and you'll see a world of pure imagination."

Theatre is a chocolate factory all unto itself with countless rooms and surprises and lessons! Children spend many hours watching television or DVD's or on the Internet, activities that require little more than sitting quietly and watching. Why not give them the chance to be a part of an audience watching live actors on a stage? Engage their imaginations and creative spirits. It's pure magic for the young and old alike.

There are many benefits to seeing a play. First, it's a chance to dress up and go out. I have an old photo of my great aunt and uncle at a college football game in 1925. They are wearing suits, ties, hats and gloves. Today's world offers few opportunities to dress up. Theatre can be a chance to wear that fancy outfit if you want. Right along with dressing up comes the lesson of civilized behavior. Clothes make the kid and here's your chance to teach them how to behave in more formal settings.

In addition, going to a play is a great chance to teach good audience behavior: when to applaud, when to sit still and listen and not talk, and how to show appreciation for an artist's work. How to be part of a group of people quietly enjoying a story. Good manners are sometimes lost in today's hurried world. This is a chance to take a few moments to introduce or reinforce them. It's a character lesson in an evening!

Yet another thing to be gained from attending a play is nurturing a hobby, interest, or skill. Theatre is a collaborative art and almost anything a child enjoys is a part of it. Of course, budding actors, dancers, and musicians will find role models here, but many other things are a part of putting together a play as well. Like to draw or paint? Design sets and props? Like to sew? Make costumes. Interested in makeup, photography, videography, or technology? All of these skills can find a home in theatre. Perhaps attending that first play will inspire a lifelong hobby or even a career. Plus, just loving theatre and being an avid theatregoer is a great and creative pastime that brings people together.

Theatre is a direct connection to reading, literature, and history. Many plays are based on a specific book or folktale or time or person in history. Take that reluctant reader to a play and then enjoy the book the play was based on together. OR, read the book first, then see the show and compare the two. Talk about the historical background of the show. (Think of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and the Holocaust or *To Kill a Mockingbird* and racism.)

Theatre brings literature and history to life and can take your child's understanding of them to a deeper level. Discuss how the show could be changed or improved by adding different elements or characters. Bloom's taxonomy of learning calls this "synthesis," and it is a high level thinking skill. After seeing a play, this kind of discussion is not work-it's fun! And don't stop there: try writing your own version of the show or create a new one based on a favorite book. Draw a set, find costumes, design the program or poster, research the people involved, and act it out.

Going to a play is also a wonderful way to be together as a family - moms, dads, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. My sister has started a tradition of taking our family to a play each holiday season. The children are young now, so we are seeing children's shows, but I hope that in the future we will expand to teen and adult shows. It's a chance to experience a story together. "Remember when we saw...?" will start many future conversations. You and the children in your life can build memories at the theatre.

### **Selecting a Play**

Minnesota has a rich theatre scene for all ages. There are children's plays, puppet shows, dances and more. Any time of year, you can find theatre performances for your child, regardless of their age. Here are a few tips for choosing a show:

1. Consider the age recommendations given by the theatre. The ads will often say "for all ages" or "ages 8-12" and so on. If no age ranges are given, call the box office and ask.
2. Pick a play that is under an hour for younger theatregoers. Again, call the box office and ask how long the show is and if there are intermissions.
3. Is your child ready to sit through a play? You are the best judge of that. Can they watch a half hour TV show? Can they sit and listen to a story for that long? If you aren't sure, pick a short play to begin with.
4. If attention span is a concern, find a play with music or interaction with the audience.
5. Got a wiggly child? Request seats on the aisle or in the balcony, so you can leave easily without disturbing others. Be sure to talk about proper behavior before you go.
6. For an older child, consider books they may have read or their particular interests.
7. Research choices with teachers and other parents too.

Any way you look at it, attending a play with your child is a win-win situation. They will learn manners, develop new interests, see literature and history come alive, and have fun. So go to a play. You may open the door to a "world of pure imagination" which will never close.