



Taking the Stage

Child Performers Get a Chance to Shine at The Atlanta Workshop Players Company

[WRITTEN BY MISTY REAGIN]

Most children enjoy the magical world of make-believe, and The Atlanta Workshop Players Company (AWP) allows them to bring their fantasies to life. However, children and teenagers who are interested in the performing arts gain more than just acting skills at this professional theater company. They also gain friendships, confidence and an appreciation for the arts.

Founder and Artistic Director Lynn Stallings started the nonprofit company in 1981 to provide a fun and non-competitive atmosphere where kids could develop their talents. This past September, AWP moved into its new 2,400-square-foot space in Alpharetta called The Studio of the Arts. The brightly colored studio has space for independent study, a television studio for on-camera classes, and a large area for practicing plays and musicals.

Lights, Camera ... Action!

AWP offers classes and workshops for children and teenagers age 5 through 18. For example, the Theatre Production class allows kids to explore the performing arts through theater games, scene study, stage movement, improvisation, character development, audition techniques and performance opportunities. This course ends with a full production in the spring. In the Essentials class, kids participate in a series of workshops designed to prepare them for a successful career in television and film. "There are typically 10 to 15 kids per class," Stallings said. "We like to keep it small so they can get a lot of individual attention."

Some classes, such as Hollywood Bound and Broadway Bound, are only available through auditions. These professional training programs are for kids 10 and older who are motivated to pursue a career in television/film or on Broadway. AWP also recently started offering the Hollywood Bound and Broadway Bound classes for adults.

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Left to right: Kids at Atlanta Workshop Players have fun and build confidence while learning essential acting skills. Sally Callahan, Keonnie Betts, Corinne Weintraub and Brooke Pulaski all perform in *Kid's Cabaret*.

In the Hollywood Bound class, kids learn abilities such as on-camera acting, personal marketing, on-set etiquette and interview skills. Class participants are introduced to agents and casting directors, and they can take an optional trip to Los Angeles to study and network. In the Broadway Bound class, kids work with top directors and choreographers to develop the skills needed to make it onto Broadway. Through this class, kids are able to showcase their talents for casting directors while learning about musical theater. The Broadway Bound class offers an optional trip to New York to study and network with top industry professionals.

Damien Haas, a 17 year old who has been coming to AWP for seven years, has taken the Hollywood Bound class several times. "I especially love the trip we take to L.A. because we get to meet a lot of people who are actually living the life of an L.A. actor," he said.

Curtain Calls

AWP also performs educational tour shows a couple times per week for local middle schools and high schools. "A Play on Words" is about three kids who are writing a report about different books ranging from Shakespeare to Dr. Seuss. According to 18-year-old Mark Lynch, who has been coming to AWP for 12 years, the characters come out of the books and take the kids in to experience the stories.

Another tour show, "Beneath the Surface," focuses on social issues. The show is about seven kids who were friends when they were younger but who have now gone very separate ways. "There is a guy that has gone into gang activity, a girl who is pregnant, a kid whose parents don't support him and a kid who has hurt his knee and can't follow his dream of playing football," Damien said. "The play

Below: Some of the actors at Atlanta Workshop Players include (from bottom center, clockwise) Madison Bailey, Kristen Wheeler, Jenna Hall, Matthew Ferrell, Erica-Marie Sanchez, Kaitlin Reynell, Cassidy Allen and Cameron Gaskins.



touches on a lot of different problems, and it always helps the kids in the audience because it is similar to a lot of things that go on in their lives.”

Stallings believes “Beneath the Surface” is especially important because it brings up issues that are difficult to talk about but need to be addressed. “There is one story in the play that is about abuse and, at the end of almost every single show, there are a couple of kids that walk out of the audience in tears and go straight to their counselors and ask for help,” she said. “The kids in the audience relate to the things they see on stage, and it makes them realize that they can change the course of their lives.”

AWP also puts on the Kid’s Cabaret show every other month at the Punchline Comedy Club in Sandy Springs. This variety show features about 40 kids who audition and then perform musical theater numbers, comedy sketches and specialty acts. “It is a great showcase for talented kids because we invite casting directors and agents to come and see the show,” Stallings said. “Kids get exposure to industry professionals who are in a position to hire them.”

Another great way for kids to get discovered is through AWP’s Camp Destiny. This summer camp offers weeklong classes to kids and teens age 8 to 18. Camp participants choose a major, such as dance, video or musical theater, and focus on those classes. According to Stallings, about 1,000 kids typically come to Camp Destiny. “We have had kids from five continents with very different cultures and different levels of expertise,” Stallings said. “It is an amazing bonding experience.”

During camp, AWP also offers a two-week Advanced Production Session (APS) where kids audition and rehearse to mount a full musical production



Erica-Marie Sanchez, Cameron Gaskins and Jenna Hall (top row), and Kristen Wheeler and Cassidy Allen (bottom row) show off their entertaining personalities.

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such as “Grease” or “A Chorus Line.” AWP invites casting directors that come to camp during the APS auditions. “In 2007, there were several kids who were cast in a television project from these auditions,” Stallings said. “The year before that, we had a New York casting director who cast a lot of shows on Broadway, and she offered a role in ‘The Color Purple’ to one of our kids.” This year, Camp Destiny will feature seven weeks of classes and will be held at Oglethorpe University during the entire month of June with the APS taking place July 6-19. AWP also is offering a day camp this year for kids age 5 through 11 that will be held at Studio of the Arts.

According to Damien, everyone comes together in a family atmosphere at AWP and at Camp Destiny. “We have kids that have never even seen a play, but they make friends with everybody and come together to support each other.”

Sierra Blaze, an 18 year old who has been coming to AWP since she was 6, feels the same way. “We get to watch each other grow, which is an amazing thing not only as human beings but also as performers,” she said.

As a nonprofit organization, AWP accepts donations that help to provide nearly 60 full and partial scholarships per year for those wishing to attend Camp Destiny. These scholarships cover room and board, tuition and incidentals.

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Left to right: Rebecca Vaughan, Rachel Glover, Hope Endrenyi and Mercedes Pratt are some of the 40 actors who regularly participate in Kid's Caberet.

And the Award Goes to...

Throughout the years, AWP has had many accomplishments. While the company has put on charitable performances to raise money for causes such as cancer research and for children suffering from abuse, AWP's most notable accomplishment is that it has helped launch a multitude of professional careers. "We have a ton of kids on Broadway right now, and we have several that are leads in their own television series," Stallings said. Two of AWP's local success stories include 16-year-old Kyle Massey who plays the lead on the Disney television series "Cory in the House" and 23-year-old Chris Lowell on ABC's show "Private Practice."

Lynch would love to turn his acting talents into a career. "I think you've got to go for it when you have that kind of passion, which most of us here do," he said. "I really don't think we have an option." As for Blaze, who is also interested in photography, "I know, in some way, acting will always be a part of my life," she said.

According to Stallings, the best part about what AWP offers is that it helps kids build confidence. "It gives them communication skills, and it makes them feel comfortable in front of an audience," she said. "No matter what career they go into, they will have to be in front of an audience to give a sales presentation or a speech."

In addition to helping the kids, AWP also benefits the community by teaching people to see each other in a different way. "We created 'Beneath the Surface' because people usually look at others on the outside without really seeing what is on the inside," Stallings said. "It is encouraging people to see each other on a deeper level and to respect and honor each other, which I think is important." She aims to help kids change the world one audience at a time. **PN**



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