



PHOTOS BY AMANDA THOMPSON

Students rehearse "The Trial of the Big Bad Wolf" by Val Cheatham at the Magnolia School theater camp.

Students learn life skills at acting camp

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The Magnolia School has provided educational instruction for more than 30 years, and for nearly as long, their Center Stage summer camp has been open to local children. Young theater buffs spend two busy weeks exploring acting, improvisation, directing, costuming, set design and construction. The camp culminates in a production, but the emphasis isn't on the final performance, it's on what kids gain along the way.

"The show needs to be good and watchable and we always have to do the best that we can but getting the kids to work together well as a group is probably the most important thing we do," says camp coordinator Paige Brey. She has been a faculty member at the Magnolia School for 16 years and prior to that, taught high school theater in Gainesville.

Brey is committed to meeting the individual needs of each child and cultivating an inclusive environment where campers can work collaboratively and develop confidence. "Just about every skill that you need as an adult is incorporated into the theater. It gives them skills they didn't have and brings out the skills that they do possess. It gives them the ability to go forward."

Because the Center Stage camp is open to kids age 5 to 14, campers work in two groups, each with age-appropriate material, activities and exercises designed to hone theater and life skills. One of those games involves tossing a ball between group members to focus their energy and help improve cooperation and concentration. Fourteen-year-old Emily Cumper points out an additional benefit. "It helps develop non-verbal communication skills. You have to read each other's mind and make sure you're very connected."

David Hagans, 12, recently moved to Tallahassee and the Center Stage camp has introduced him to some new people. Though he's never been involved in theater, he says "it's been fun. I like the games that we play here like scarf tag. You have a scarf on your belt loop and you try and get the other person's scarf before they get yours."

Rehn Burner-Reeves, 12, explains how this game develops stage skills.

"Sometimes in theater you have to fake punch. Sometimes people punch but it won't look like a punch or they'll actually hit the person. With scarf tag, you have to get close while grabbing it without hurting the person." This type of stage combat exercise allows actors to establish safe boundaries and practice self-control.

Though stage combat doesn't factor into the play that the older students are working on, there is plenty of room to explore comedic timing and develop characters. Rehn describes "Action News: Now With 10% More Action!" by Jonathan Rand as "a rather comedic version of a news station." Emily's role as a TV newscaster, coincidentally aligns with her real life career goal. She says "I love her as a character. The play is a satire and they're doing a lot of stereotypes but underneath that she is a very smart lady and more than just the role that people give her."

The younger students are engaged in a musical production by Val Cheatham titled "The Trial of the Big Bad Wolf." Seven-year old Savannah Ferguson was cast as the prosecuting attorney, Horney Dangerfield and she has especially enjoyed "learning the songs and how to do the choreography." Light and energetic, this show offers an opportunity for dozens of campers to participate both on stage and behind the scenes.

Through the Center Stage camp, students gain a wide variety of skills that apply to the real world but what most captivates Savannah is theater's magic. "I like how you can pretend to be somebody else." She adds that theater is important because "you can make yourself believe it. If everything is realistic, it's kind of boring. You need to have creativity and stuff that makes it fun. Being able to use your imagination is really simple, all you have to do is just believe and think."

Amanda Kariooth Thompson is the Education and Exhibitions Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).



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The ball toss game helps students develop cooperation, concentration and non-verbal skills.