

Theatre Troupe Charms the Children

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Last week, five student actors traveled through five states in five days, performing for school and community groups as part of the nation's oldest performing arts tour for children, the University of New Hampshire's Little Red Wagon. And all they ask for when they arrive at the next venue is a flat surface and an electrical outlet.

The Little Red Wagon is in its 41st summer of entertaining children – and the young at heart – throughout New England. The traveling children's theatre, which includes puppetry and story-telling, has visited every community in the Granite State, and every corner of New England, proving that real-time theatre can enchant and entertain as much as Angry Birds. And, it is the longest running nonprofit, children's theatre tour in the U.S.

According to Nancy Pearson, director of marketing and communications in the Department of Theatre and Dance, the group used to be entirely comprised of UNH theatre students but five years ago, organizers opened up auditions to students from other colleges and universities. "It's really a professional summer theatre tour," she explains.

Barbara Massar, executive director of Pro Portsmouth, has booked the Wagon for the last several years, as part its Summer in the Street series...only for this show, aptly called Kids in the Street. A portion of Pleasant Street is closed off and Massar estimates that 500 children and their families attend the show.

"I work with a lot of different groups of all ages and all kinds, and I can tell you these students take this very seriously. They show up on time, they set up, they're just terrific." And, because the performance takes place on the street, she adds the kids really love it because they're right there, "feet in front of them."

Each actor plays two or even three roles for each show, and Pearson says Little Red Wagon is a wonderful training opportunity.

Every year, faculty from the Department of Theatre and Dance direct and sometimes adapt a story for young children. This year, for example, *The Frog Prince*, written and directed by David Kaye, with music by Tim Allen, is loosely based on the story by The Brothers Grimm. An ordinary fairy tale kingdom finds itself under an evil spell that makes everyone - especially the princess - miserable. Luckily, a good-natured frog arrives just in time to break the spell and return things back to normal.

Tellin' Tales, the 2012 season's second show, by playwright April Jones, takes the audience on a walk around the world and uses masks and movement to portray folk stories from Appalachian, Spanish, Cherokee, and Japanese cultures. It even answers the question: Why do roosters crow every morning?



“The Little Red wagon is one of the cornerstones of our Summer Reading Program,” says Marie Kelly, children’s librarian at the Rochester Public Library. “Families look forward to the show every year and it’s wonderful to see such accomplished performances, and the energy and enthusiasm of the actors engage even the youngest members of the audience.”

Kelly estimates she has invited the show to the library for the past 25 years and “each year I think ‘This was their best performance yet,’ and then the next year they are every bit as good!”

When it began, Little Red Wagon was instrumental to the introduction of theatre education into the public school system as a supportive tool for reading and learning. The traveling theatre was selected by the State Arts Council to represent the New Hampshire arts community at the National Bicentennial in Washington, D.C. in 1976. Funded solely by the public and private agencies that book performances, the theatre troupe performs for children and family audiences at schools, libraries, festivals, fairs, banquets, hospitals, recreation centers, state parks, camps and churches. The group performs at nearly 70 locations throughout New England each summer.

Pearson says one of their favorite venues is right at home, on the plaza adjacent to Rudman Hall, when Easter Seals sponsors a performance for its younger clients who represent all parts of the autism spectrum. “These typically are kids who have a really hard time connecting,” Pearson says, “but they connect with the performance. Last year, during the question and answer with the cast after the show, one little boy raised his hand and asked, ‘Will you be my friend?’”

Let the show begin!

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