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# Springer springs forward with theatre education

In 1996, the Springer took giant steps toward becoming a regional theatre with a national reputation by hiring Ron Anderson and the founding of the Springer Theatre Academy.

As the Springer Theatre Academy enters its 18<sup>th</sup> year, it has become the largest theatre training program for young actors (5-18 years old) in the Southeast – one of the largest in the United States.

The centerpiece of the Springer Theatre Academy is the summer drama camp, but it is active year around with weekend classes in the fall and winter. During the summer, students take classes in stage movement, voice and speech, improvisation, musical theatre and scene study.

Young people who appear in Springer main stage and children's theatre productions have to be Springer Theatre Academy students.

The Springer Theatre Academy also sponsors a monthly showcase for student projects at Friday evening No Shame Junior performances, where the first 15 people to sign up get five minutes to perform. It just has to be original.

The "Life Skills" theatre education philosophy means that the Springer Theatre Academy's goal is not the training of lots of future actors, but the changing of young people's lives through teaching theatre values – valuing teamwork, working hard toward a common goal, appreciating your partner as the most important person on stage, having the courage to risk failure or being laughed, and being bold.

"We are interested in the actor part of our students; but we are more interested in the person part," said Springer Theatre Academy director Ron Anderson.

Classes and curriculum are structured on an age-appropriate level, with acting core subjects in the summer and theatre electives during the school year. Instruction is often game-centered, and the environment for learning is safe, supportive and often silly.

"There is no other home with more laughter and love and encouragement," said Springer Theatre Academy student Mary Kathryn Alford.

This summer around 600 campers will attend the Springer summer drama camp in a variety of two-week, three-week and four-week sessions June 2 – Aug. 1.

Summer drama campers study stage movement, voice and speech, improvisation, musical theatre, contemporary and classical scenes, and foundations of theatre.

students is caused by the constant preoccupation with making sure that everyone is included. When you look at a group of students, it's hard to tell who doesn't fit in because often the student who is sitting by themselves is one of the most popular students in the class. Because the peer group pressure has been uniquely rearranged to focus on competing to make everyone feel included, bunches of kids tend to gather around students who they're worried might not feel included.

When hanging out with the unpopular kids is the popular thing to do, notions of popularity get turned upside down with memorable results.

Life Skills theatre education begins each day with all the students and teachers gathering in a group meeting and issuing challenges for each other.

"I always challenge everybody to be zesty," said student Will Oliver. "That's how I want to spend my day."

Each day ends at 4 p.m. with a group meeting where students and teachers stand again to call each other out — for acknowledgements. The last thing every day is Salutations when everyone stands together and to the music of Pachelbel's "Canon" makes choreographed movements that allude to honoring the past, acknowledging the present and saluting the future.

"The students are all very aware, and it's part of everything we do, that we share this space with a long list of historic figures," said Anderson. "The fact that we're one of only seven U.S. theatres that are National Historic Landmarks makes the Springer Theatre Academy a very different and memorable experience."

Today, the Springer is a regional theatre well on its way to a national reputation. In 2007, the Springer announced a capital campaign to build a second theatre for children's theatre and studio productions that benefit from a more intimate actor-audience experience. Two months later the banks crashed and the country went into the most severe economic downturn in more than 80 years. The Springer's board of directors made the heroic decision to continue the campaign. And the donations continued to come in, even as theatres were closing across the country.

This fall the Dorothy W. McClure Theatre opened. It is named after the longtime Springer patron, donor and actor, who is more popularly known as Dot just as the namesake theatre has become popularly known as "The Dot."

The Dot is the realization of a 50-year dream. In the early '60s, the Springer was almost torn down to make room for a parking garage. The once illustrious theatre, the grandest between New York and New Orleans when it opened in 1871, had fallen into disrepair, abandoned for five years.

On the day the wrecking ball was scheduled to swing, Emily Woodruff woke up with the conviction that the demolition had to be stopped. She gathered a group of investors and the Springer was saved to become a center for non-profit theatre.

Part of the mission of those early days was the building of a second theatre, for theatre for young people, to nurture new works and to produce plays that benefit from the intimacy of a smaller audience.