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Traveling Players Ensemble: Reconnecting Theater With Nature

By Christopher Dooly

The positive effects of art on growing children cannot be overstated. When young people find an artistic outlet to express themselves - whether it's through music, painting or performance - they're able to build a stronger sense of self. The exploration of a child's own emotional needs presents an opportunity for growth, something unique to art. Traveling Players Ensemble (TPE) recognizes this invaluable benefit to young people and takes it another step further: connecting with the outdoors.

Theater was born in the outdoors. Ancient Greeks built their sacred amphitheaters into the sides of mountains, using the stunning views of nature for the backdrops of their performances. Theater was a communion: indeed between the players and the audience, but also with their gods, with nature. It's about giving over to something greater than ourselves, in the hopes of having a spiritual discovery. And through discovery comes growth and understanding.

TPE starts with its close-knit ensemble, a dedicated troupe of players who pull equal weight within the company. Ensembles prioritize the group over the performer, a notion often in conflict with traditional theater troupes where the most talented performers are given the most substantial roles. Ensembles, on the other hand, provide safer environments for individuals to grow and challenge each other. This strategy forms the basis for their educational programs. At TPE, students receive individualized instructions at a ratio of 4:1 students to educators, optimal for growth as artists.

In keeping with tradition as an ensemble performance troupe, TPE allows kids to take their theatrical works on tour. Sometimes this means visiting a local theater festival in the D.C. area, sometimes it's an overnight camping trip at a local hospital, library or park. For their more advanced students, TPE produces a one-two week tour, complete with overnight camping, at a historical location such as The Madeira School or Colonial Williamsburg.

Introducing kids to theater and the great outdoors has no better beginning than TPE's award-winning summer camp. There are a host of options available during the summer season, for campers from 3rd grade all the way to 12th. Kids can join a one-week beginner acting class, a multi-week Mythology Ensemble, work on props, sets and costumes as part of the Technical Theatre program, explore traditional masks with the Commedia Troupe or even join in a professional-level Traveling Troupe. All offerings are guided by TPE's professional ensemble theater artists and culminate in an outdoor performance.

Theater and performance are only half of this award-winning equation: nature and the outdoors bring it all together. That's why Traveling Players Ensemble hosts summer overnights every Thursday at Lake Fairfax Park. Kids pitch their own tents to sleep in, gather firewood for dinner and toast s'mores and learn all of the necessary skills for proper Leave No Trace camping. Younger campers in middle school use these nights to play organized games, explore and bond with their campmates, which help form lasting friendships. High schoolers, since they'll be heading out on multi-week tours, hone their camping skills to ensure they're fully equipped to take care of themselves on the road. This perfectly exemplifies the ideals of Traveling Players Ensemble: helping kids develop physical and emotional self-reliance.

When summer ends and camping season enters its hibernation, TPE shifts over to fall and winter programming. The same expert trainers from summer camp continue to develop children's theatrical skills through improv training, scene study and movement,



available to students in grades 4 through 12. The classes remain small, ensuring each student is given the maximum amount of attention to grow his or her craft. Of course, all work still culminates in a showcase or festival performance. Additionally, young performers can join in community field trips or sign up for one-on-one monologue coaching.

Realistically, the cost of professional-level training and drama summer camps can be tough for many families. That's why Traveling Players Ensemble is proud to offer scholarship opportunities for dedicated children interested in immersing themselves in the arts. Scholarships can cover anywhere from 10 percent to 100 percent of tuition costs for summer camps, classes and events. There's no limit to how many scholarships a child can receive, and TPE boasts awarding some campers for 6 years with over \$14,000 in aid. As a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit company, donations are paramount to the success of TPE's programming and support to children with drama scholarships.

If you're interested in donating to Traveling Players Ensemble's award-winning theater company or learning more about their annual offerings, visit travelingplayers.org.

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