

Youtheater Handles Young Minds with Sensitivity, Respect

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Baranowski recalls directing a stage adaptation of "Beauty and the Beast" several years ago. One "action sequence" he had predicted would be particularly engaging caused a perceptible wave of restlessness to wash over the play's youthful audience. "In a sense, you can't cheat 'em," Baranowski laughs. "Even Shakespeare must have had audiences like that."

"There's always a certain amount of talking going on, even when the kids are completely absorbed in the play," comments Palma. Children, he points out, talk to their parents and friends about what they are seeing, ask questions, and even express approval. "Restlessness doesn't always mean they're not going with it."

Although both Baranowski and Palma admit that a known title like "Charlotte's Web" frequently draws a larger audience than a play without such broad name recognition, the Youtheatre program has earned a reputation for willingness to experiment with less familiar theatrical fare. Next spring, Nazareth plans to do a reprise of "The Arkansaw Bear," a moving and provocative children's drama that introduces in a strikingly unsentimental fashion the subjects of death and a young girl's reaction to it.

"We had such a positive response to the play when we first produced it last summer, we've decided to put it in our season for next spring," says Palma. "It becomes an effective vehicle for starting a dialogue with children about death — or the separation of divorce. It handles its topic well without being heavy-handed."

Palma compares the impact of such plays on children to the thesis expounded by noted child psychologist Dr. Bruno Bettelheim in "The Uses of Enchantment," a book that explores the meaning and importance of fairy tales, "these stories," according to Bettelheim, "that start where the child really is."

"All of these big things that go through (children's) little minds can be dealt with on stage, with a humor, dignity and honesty that children can handle," Palma points out. "A lot of children's theater glosses over that."

You can do nonsense, slapstick or farce for children, as you can with adults — but not as a steady diet."

Because Nazareth Youtheatre treats a play as a piece of literature, a theatrical problem, rather than pandering to what some might perceive to be the limited intellects of youngsters, the program appeals to adults as well as children.

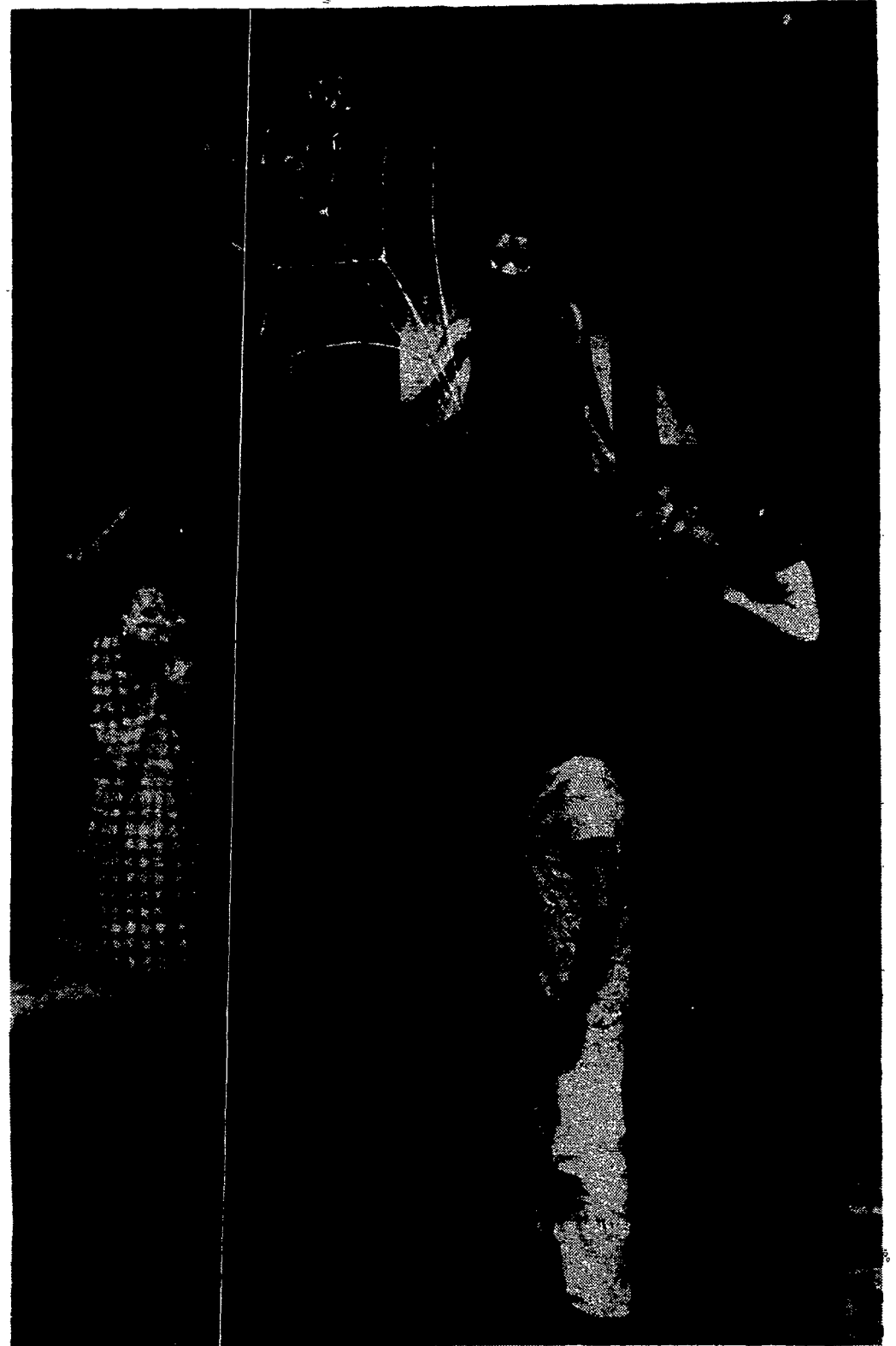
"We have an amazing number of adults who come *without* children," says Palma. "In the 10 years since we've been here, we see the same families coming back again and again, with and without children."

"I think kids are basically like adults," he adds. "They enjoy socializing, being with other kids, being a part of an audience really involved in a live performance. Kids especially identify with other kids on the stage, like Deanna Fleysner, who plays Fern Arable in 'Charlotte's Web.' They really suspend their disbelief and have fun afterwards because they know it was an illusion."

"I'm not saying children are little adults, but we do tend to sell them short," Palma concludes. A child, he says, has an intellect that is just developing, and that is what a successful children's theater program should address.

Since the early days when the Nazareth program sprang up out of a series of workshops, puppet theater groups, and drama club performances for children, Youtheatre has managed to do just that. "At various times, the performing group was called Arts Center Players, TIC/TOC Players (from an acronym that stands for 'theater in the classroom/theater outside the classroom'), and the Center Players," says Joe Baranowski. "In the late '70s, we began bringing in bigger names to the Arts Center, as well as more touring events. David also introduced a mini-series, with local performers like the MIMeworkshop and Sunshine Too, who were showcased here. There are also films for children. We deal with all aspects of arts for children. Our education program is also becoming more important."

"Charlotte's Web" is slated for three more performances before the play closes on June 2. On Saturday, June 1, two perfor-



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Charlotte's Web characters Fern (Jennifer Kuhn), Wilbur (Tom Judge), Templeton (Mark Almekinder), and Charlotte (Marcia Diggs) take notice of one of Charlotte's creations that was soon to make Wilbur famous.

mances will be given, at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. The following day, the production will end with a 2 p.m. performance.

Later in the summer, from July 10 through July 27, Youtheatre will offer a production of "The Brave Little Tailor," another children's classic.

If, as Farmer Zuckerman insists in the current production of "Charlotte's Web," "children pay better attention than grown-ups," Nazareth Youtheatre should have another box office smash.

Tell a kid. You might not even have to mark it down on your summer calendar.

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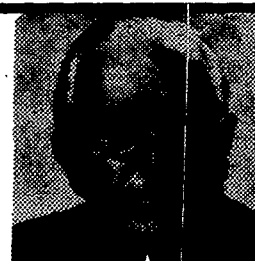
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Spirit Alive Talent Sought

The "Spirit Alive" effort is going strong, and plans are set for a parade, liturgy and picnic. A special feature of the diocesanwide festival, set for Saturday, June 8, at St. John Fisher College, will be roving entertainment — an area in which all members of the diocese can help.

Amateur, semi-professional or professional entertainers are welcomed and encouraged to help entertain all age groups and ethnic backgrounds. Possibilities which would be particularly welcome include: children's dance and singing schools/groups; folk groups as well as any group or individual singers and/or dancers; clowns, mimes and magic acts; ethnic performers/singers; story tellers and more!

Anyone interested in lending talent to Spirit Alive can contact the Diocesan Communications Office at (716)328-3210.



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