

“*Ever since I was younger than you are.*” It’s what I always answer when I get the “How long have you been...[acting, performing, playing]” question from young visitors at the end one of our theater performances at Treehouse Museum. I love to get that question, because what it really asks is “When can *I* do it? When can I start to do what you do?”

I remember starting. I started, as a performer, where everybody starts (if they are permitted), with the benign ambush of anyone who would allow me to show off, to tell my story, to bang my bongos, or whistle my tune. I started performing for grandma, of course, and for captive audiences of siblings and pets and plushies and half-willing neighbors. Who doesn’t remember the summer 1978 neighborhood performance - mostly improvised - of Star Wars...the musical? It got a Tony that year (Tony Villalobos from down the street. He played a very short Chewbacca).

And why not? Experiences like that are fundamentally story-play. We are all natural performers and storytellers. Not everyone takes to it as a profession (thank goodness – the rest of us need an audience), but anyone who has either asked or answered the questions, “What did you do today?” or “Where are you going tomorrow?” is in the business of story.

But as genuinely delightful as those ad hoc, back porch productions can be, there is something significant about participation in a structured theater experience. When a practiced veteran of the stage is there to guide the theatrical process for young actors the experience is taken out of the realm of play to a new developmental level and the benefit to the student is more than just the honing of the skill – the craft (insert posh and pretentious voice) of “*The Theatre.*” With direction, participation in a structured drama class or production is really a guided exercise in the processes of suspending disbelief, of practicing empathy, and of engaging in what amounts to a practical preparation for social interaction – all within the process of preparing and presenting story to an audience. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky, a hero of child development philosophy, called it “scaffolding” - essentially the process by which an adult (read expert) provides guidance and structure while gradually removing support until the child demonstrates the skill on her own.<sup>1</sup>

I revel in the fact that, now, I get to be one of those guiding adults that “scaffolds” the theater experience for young children. At Treehouse this experience takes the form of daily interactive, improvisational theater programs in which children are encouraged to put on costumes, assume the role, and with the help of an actor/director/narrator act out the story. It’s my childhood experience writ large and I still get to experience it, daily, in my work in the Museum.

And in Ogden, there are plenty of other places where that guided experience happens. I was very excited to learn that back among the available programs for theater this summer is “Kids Act Up,” a two week summer camp for kids 8 – 18 at Peery’s Egyptian Theater in downtown Ogden. Anne Reeder, the theater’s event manager, tells me that their camp experience this summer will even feed into auditions for the new Ogden Musical Theater production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

To the south, Ziegfield Theater has an ongoing program for young performers in their “Zig Youth” program with performances on the Zigfield Stage and again chances to audition for shows in the regular Zigfield season.

For hopeful young (and old) actors that are at least 6 years of age Beverly’s Terrace Plaza Playhouse is auditioning for their production of the musical *Annie*. This one’s coming up soon! Auditions for the production start on April 22. But if you miss this opportunity, don’t fret; The Terrace Plaza Playhouse frequently does shows that invite young actors to audition.

And of course, in addition to the year-round, daily, drop-in, theater programs at Treehouse, the Museum in downtown Ogden is offering two, weeklong, summer theater camps for children 7 – 11, each ending with a performance on the Treehouse Stage.

Each of these organizations is a working theater that caters to the family audience and provides chances for children to see and to start their own experiences in the theater. And there are many others. Turns out, when it comes to young folks and theater, Ogden is a pretty swell place to start.

Wes Whitby, April 2017

<sup>1</sup>Vygotsky, L.S, M. Cole, and V. [et.al.] John-Steiner. *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978.