

The News Journal

Radio Days a real classic experience **Versatile young actors do sound effects, too**

By Rachel Kipp

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Caught in a storm, the sailors pitched back and forth, arms waving and bodies trembling as they prepared for a major wave.

"Whoa!" they shouted, voices rising to mimic the rhythm of their movements.

Suddenly, the action stopped. Sara Valentine stepped forward to coach her crew, a group of preteen actors, in the art of the shipwreck.

"You're going to fall to the ground," she advised, before asking them to try the scene one more time.

When their production of William Shakespeare's "The Tempest" premiered a few days later, there were no costumes and no sets. Families, friends and others who gathered for the show just flipped on a radio. The audience couldn't see the actors' energy as they piloted the fictional ship or the emotion on the faces of two characters arguing.

Thanks to a few sound effects and a lot of practice, they didn't need to.

"On the radio, it doesn't matter what you look like, it doesn't matter who you are or where you are," said Michael Boudewyns, who co-directed the play with Valentine. "Your passion and commitment to the story, that's important."

Comedies, mysteries, romances and dramas play themselves out all summer at Radio Days, a camp put on for the past three years by the First State Children's Theater Company. Campers, ages 8 to 12, spend a week learning a story and record a 45-minute radio play broadcast the next Sunday on WVUD.

Over the past three years, the campers have tackled Shakespeare, Hans Christian Andersen, "Peter Pan," "The Wizard of Oz" and more. Although the stories are condensed for the radio, the dialogue comes directly from the original version.

"We're doing Shakespeare's play, not our version. It's their 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,' their 'Around the World in 80 Days,'" said Boudewyns, co-founder of the theater company and co-director of Radio Days. "Part of the fun is tackling what our author wrote."

Depending on the story and how many children are signed up in a given week, participants might play multiple parts in the show, girls might be called on to act out a male role, or vice versa. Some actors may have more to do than others, but Boudewyns said he and co-director Valentine try to teach the group that telling the story well is more important than which camper has the most lines.

With only a week to put together a 45-minute drama, the play is cast on Monday, and the children are recording the play 48 hours later.

For "The Tempest," Valentine and Boudewyns, both graduates of the Professional Theatre Training Program at the University of Delaware, prepared the actors to portray the characters as well as the creaks, rattles and whistles heard on a ship in the middle of a dark, stormy night. In the play, Prospero raises the magical storm to trap brother Antonio, who years earlier set Prospero and daughter Miranda adrift on a small boat that landed on a deserted island.

Gathered around three microphones, the children were assigned roles in the "storm orchestra." Gregory Wolf, 12, got a cookie sheet-shaped piece of metal to hit for thunder. Alex Miller, 10, was put in charge of a large bell. Other actors don't need props -- Valentine asked Lynsey Evans and Olivia Quinci, both 8, to blow into a microphone, turning their heads from side to side so they wait a beat between each "gust" of wind.

"It's just like swimming," Olivia said, moving her face the way she would while doing the front crawl.

As the storm started up again, Valentine warned the actors not to get too dramatic -- no unscripted falling down or wild gesticulation.

"The biggest challenge is getting the kids to focus all their natural talent and energy into a piece of equipment that is two inches from their face and to get them to be as enthusiastic as they were when they were running around," Valentine said.

Although the audience never witnessed all the running, jumping and arm-waving that goes into a performance, acting a part the way it would be done on stage makes it easier to get into the head of the characters, camper Alex Miller said. Alex has participated in many editions of Radio Days. In "The Tempest," she played Ferdinand, spirits, a lord and -- "I don't remember the other one," she giggled.

"It's very fun learning new words and being on the radio," she said. "Sometimes I get a little nervous [when the play is first broadcast], but then I start to listen to the story and just relax."

ABOUT THE CAMP

The Radio Days theater camp is offered by the First State Children's Theater through the end of August. For more information, call 545-1114 or visit www.fsctheater.com

Radio plays created by the campers are broadcast at 9 a.m. Sundays on WVUD/91.3 FM. Here is the schedule for the rest of the summer:

Today: Chitty Chitty Bang Bang

Aug. 5: The Secret Garden

Aug. 12: Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde

Aug. 19: Around the World in 80 Days

Aug. 26: Anne of Green Gables