

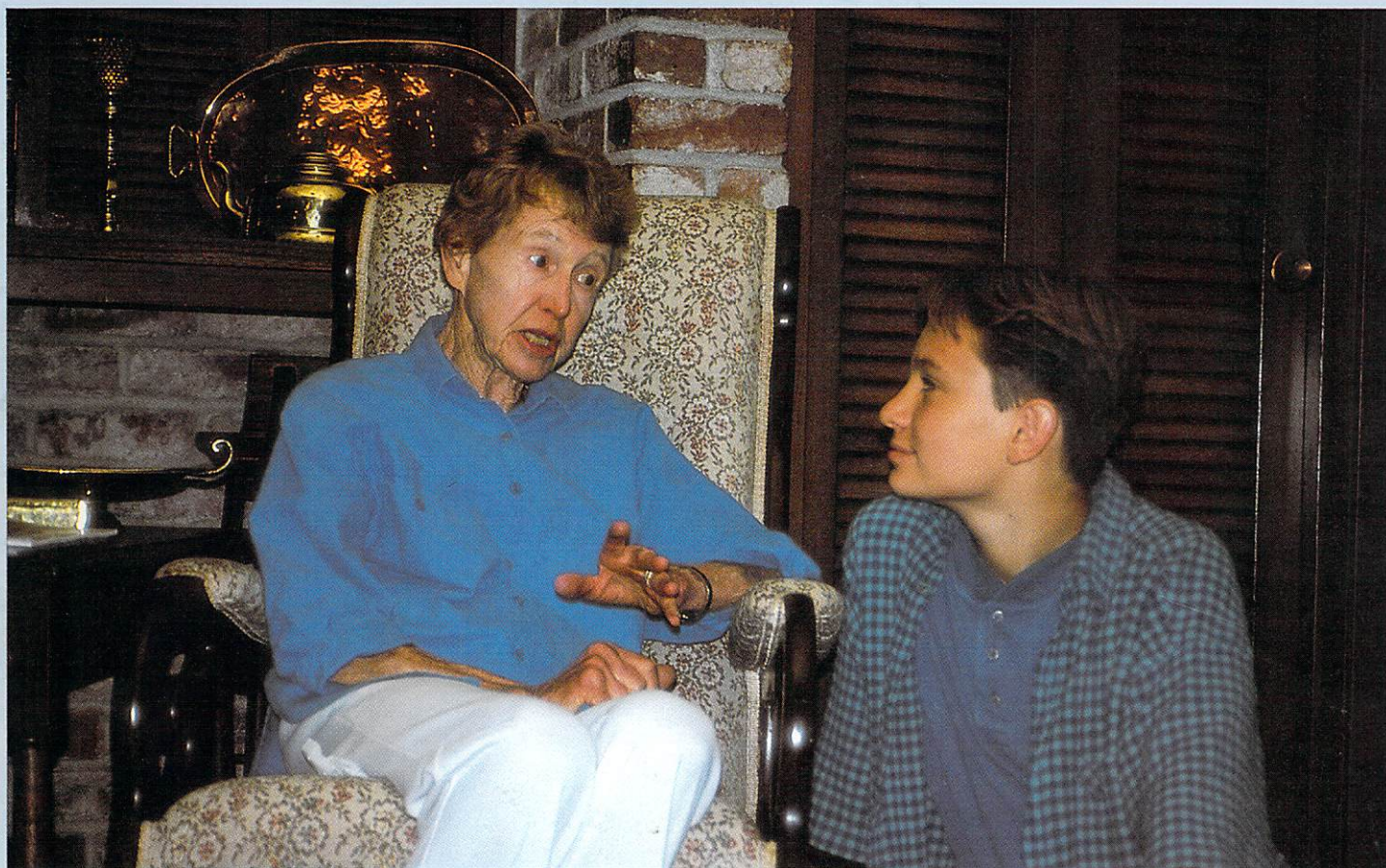
# STAGE

## DIRECTIONS

3.50

For and about regional, community, and academic theater

October 1992



*Listening carefully to every word, this youngster will soon recount the story he's hearing to an audience of family and friends.*

## Stories Spark Theater Experience

The magical power of storytelling is working new wonders in Ithaca, New York. It's part of a community-based theater program that gives adults and children a greater appreciation of the past, and their own cultural heritage, in order to understand contemporary events.

What impressed us most about this program is that, while sponsored by a major university, it can serve as a model for schools and arts organizations around the country—no matter what their size or resources.

The Ithaca program not only introduces participants—young people and senior citizens—to the joy of the theatrical experience, it also builds self-esteem, helps create an awareness and appreciation for multiculturalism, involves the theater company in the community and helps build an audience for theater in general.

### **Everyone Has a Story**

Eight schools, community and senior citizens centers take part in the Community-Based Arts Project, co-

sponsored by Roadside Theater and the Cornell University Center for Theatre Arts. The three-year project (continuing through the next academic year) provides opportunities for participants to tell their own stories in many settings and styles, according to Janet Salmons-Rue, project director.

"The project aims to foster collaboration among local residents, artists, university staff and students, as well as to provide opportunities for participation in the creative process," she explains.

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# Stories Spark Theater Experience

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The artistic medium used is storytelling because, she says, it is more accessible than other theatrical forms, particularly for those with no formal training in theater. The techniques used are not new. They're borrowed from standard theater training in concentration, sense awareness, confidence, improvisation, and trust. What makes the program unusual is that these techniques are used to widen horizons, explore the wealth of cultural differences, and encourage mutual appreciation.

Professional actors from the Junebug Productions of New Orleans and Roadside Theater of Whitesburg, KY, help local teachers, librarians and Cornell students deal with issues of cultural, social and political identity. The Cornell students have taken a class in story collection and presentation, so that they can guide others through the process.

The premise of the project—that every person has a story to tell—is brought to life as participants respond to simple questions such as “Where were your grandparents born?” “When and/or why did your family settle in this community?” “How does your family celebrate birthdays?” The answers reveal a rich variety of immigrant tales and family traditions.

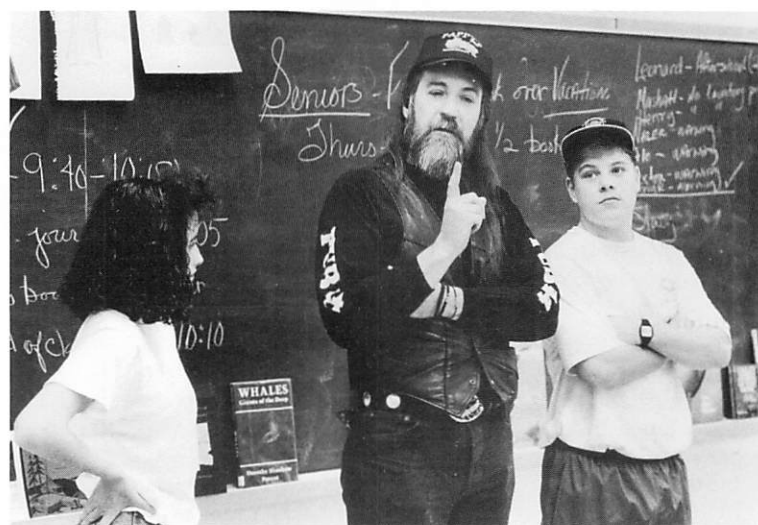
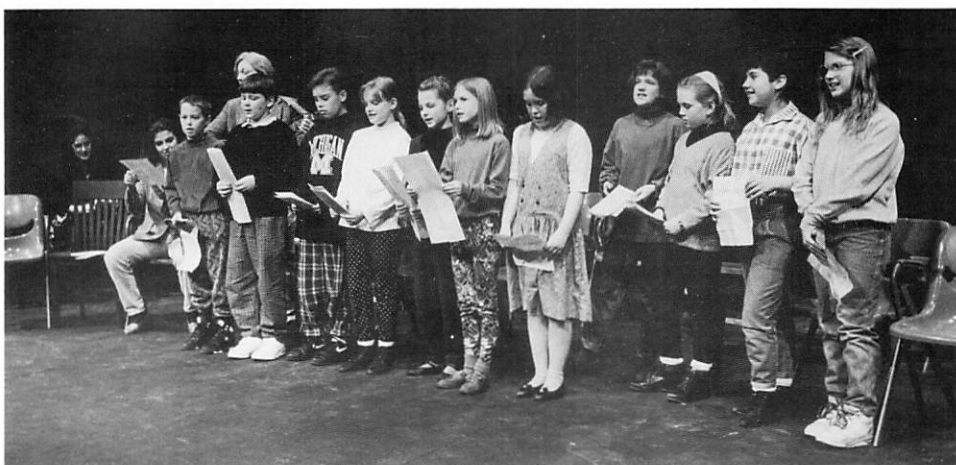
Next, participants interview family members, friends or neighbors to gather stories about their cultural, family or community history. It's a direct line of communication, done in an informal, personal way—like a postcard from the past.

“Listening is essential,” explains Salmons-Rue, “because they are asked to carry out this step orally. In other words, they learn the story so they can recount it to others.”

## Creating Respect

After participants have collected their stories, they return to work in small groups, where each one has a chance to share his or her story. The importance of listening is emphasized once again.

“By paying attention they learn to respect both the teller and the story. The group reflects on the stories, then



Top: The “story swap” brings together groups of children to share their stories on stage at Cornell University.  
Above: Roadside Theater’s Ron Short works with tenth graders Christa Rosica (left) and Bobbie Lowrance, helping them hone their presentation skills.

[Photographs by Peter Morenus]

chooses one to present. Together with the story’s originator, they further explore the nature of events and background information,” she continues.

With help from Cornell students they identify the characters and decide how to use narrative, dialog or action to tell the story.

Each group then shares the story with others. Participants provide feedback—helping each other decide whether the presentation is clear, or whether the audience needs more information.

Building trust with the youngsters is key, says Cornell senior Elena Klaw. “I think they didn’t feel that they were being evaluated; they felt

like they were telling stories to each other and so they really got to a deeper level.” When participants have gained enough confidence in the value of the story and their ability to tell it, they are ready to share it with an audience. In the case of youngsters, their stories are presented in performances for family and friends, at the school for other students, and at Cornell University’s Center for Theatre Arts for a “Story Swap” (see photo).

The participation of a professional theater company like the Roadside Theater is a natural since it uses the same technique in its own productions, which are based on the stories

## Stories Spark Theater Experience

and personal lives of real people.

Says Roadside director Dudley Cocke, "I think an audience delights in the fact that we have taken the trouble to artistically shape that experience and then we have returned that back to the audience, in a generous way, we hope, recognizing that it came from them."

### Opening New Doors

When the storytelling course was first offered in the fall of 1990, one of the sites was Newfield Central School, located in a small town nestled in the hills 12 miles south of Ithaca. Here, according to Salmons-Rue, fewer than 50% of high school graduates go on to college. An entire 7th grade took part through their English class.

At first students thought their rural town was too "boring" to yield any stories of interest. However, after talking with their families and neighbors, this attitude began to change.

"After six weeks they had more stories to share than could be presented at the Story Swap," Salmons-Rue says, "so they decided to vote and select the stories to represent their school. Stories ranged from the exotic to the mundane, but all were presented with enthusiasm."

One group of students told of the time when an eight-foot python got loose on the town's main street for a week. Participants readily identified with a different story of a father-daughter conflict. A third story described the time a study skills class became the setting for the rescue of a

student who was choking on a piece of candy. Some students portrayed their parents in stories from their youth, including one about an accident which produced a large scar "which to this day he will show to anyone." Others explored the experiences of previous generations. One girl, concluding the story of how her great-grandfather emigrated from Hamburg, Germany, "I never knew the little man with a big white mustache, but I wish I had."

Children from a downtown neighborhood, where a grand-niece of Harriet Tubman lives, presented her stories of two slaves' escape to freedom. A high school student, a recent immigrant from Cambodia, told a story that symbolized his separation and loss of family and community.

Kay Pung, 7th grade English teacher at Newfield, says that the storytelling program "opened a new door for them; they could actually get out there and tell stories. It also made them realize that there were things in their lives that are important, that are worthwhile, perhaps even as worthwhile as in books. Kids who normally have been very quiet or who have lacked in self-confidence have really blossomed." Pung says the experience has helped develop the youngsters' reading, writing, verbal and social skills.

"I think it's also given them the sense that Newfield is a place with a lot of stories, a lot of background and a lot of heritage, and they feel more valuable because of it."

### A Sense of Power

"They were shy. But they were troopers. They pulled it off," said Denise Wells, a participating local teacher working with the children, speaking after the swap. "They felt a sense of power that they could put something together and make people laugh."

"One could sense their nervousness moments before the show began," noted the *Cornell Chronicle*. "But when they walked up on stage, the audience of parents, teachers and brothers and sisters, whose feet didn't touch the floor, turned attentive and kind, laughing often, applauding and offering the biggest boost for their confidence."

### Putting the Idea to Work

According to a recent study on leisure time activity choices, most Americans gravitate toward familiar activities and those learned when they were young. This means that if we are to develop theater-going as a habit, we must start early. Youth theaters and special plays for young people are one answer. But so is the Ithaca model.

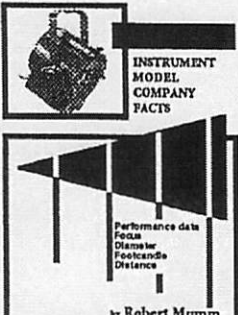
More important, this is not a program that is limited to any particular age group. By teaching people of all ages how to tell their own stories as art performance, this program helps enrich multiculturalism, re-energize oral traditions and advance the newly resurrected movement toward community-based theater.

During this period of a weak economy and continued cutbacks in the arts, Cornell's program also aims to advance an art that has been practiced by people in traditionally poorer regions of the country and, by doing so, to build individuals' self-esteem and community spirit.

As Kay Pung points out, "They discovered they had a richness in their lives and in their community that maybe they hadn't realized before. Their involvement in this storytelling is going to stay with them for a long long time." □

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