

Learning at Home



Discovering the Next Superstar: Exploring Drama, Theater, and Acting with Children

by Chris Gilman

Our Learning at Home column provides ideas and resources for you to draw on at home to support, enrich, and expand learning. We extend thanks to Dr. Holly Hertberg-Davis and Dr. Carolyn Callahan of the University of Virginia for coordinating this series of columns.

Whether your child has a flair for the dramatic or a desire to be the next Fellini, Hollywood and Broadway hold great excitement and wonder for children. Children are natural performers. From the first time they create their own circus, magic act, or pretend to dance like a ballerina, their imaginations are actively constructing a world of fantasy. However, those games do not have to stay imaginary. It is difficult to determine if your child just has a passing fancy with the dramatic or if this is the beginning of a lifelong passion for theater. However, even if your child has a passing fancy, the skills learned through theater (i.e. art, sewing, leadership, and organization) are valuable and will transfer to other interest and passions. There are myriad opportunities for children to learn and get involved with theater, acting, and movies.

Children often marvel at the fame actors achieve, the creative freedom of expressing themselves through script and screenwriting, and the challenge of creating costumes and props that accurately depict the setting and time period of the movie, musical, or play. The following resources are intended to introduce children to the enchanting world of theater and movies. Although most of the resources deal with school-based or community theaters, parents can work with their children to scale the ideas to be appropriate for neighborhood or home-based productions as well.

Theater for Young Children

While many children have vivid imaginations and creative spirits, not all will want to pursue theater, acting, or movies. If you think your child may have the acting bug you can start with even a very young child using some of the resources below.

On Stage: Theater Games and Activities for Kids (1997). By Lisa Bany-Winters. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, ISBN 1556523246. 180 pages, paperback, \$14.95.

This book provides scores of games for children of all ages that will allow them to be creative and perform. The games are also

designed to be educational and develop some of the basic skills children will need to be actors when they grow up. It also covers some of the other elements of theater, including puppetry, costuming, and makeup for beginners.

Puppet Mania: The World's Most Incredible Puppet Making Book Ever. (2004). By John E. Kennedy. Central Islip, NY: North Light Books, ISBN 1581803729. 64 pages, paperback, \$14.99.

Many children love puppets, and this book is a good way to introduce your child to the magic of puppetry. This book explains how to make puppets and turn them into characters by lip synching, body movements, and imagination.

Theater for Adolescents

Screen/Scriptwriting

The start of any great movie or play is with a single idea that blossoms into a script or screenplay for the actors and directors to bring to life.

The Elements of Playwriting by Louis E. Catron (2001). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, ISBN 157766227X. 240 pages, paperback, \$14.95.

Everyone must start with an introduction to a topic, and this book is an exceptional introduction to writing plays and dramatic fiction. Using a how-to format, the book describes the elements of a great play and will guide your child in creating his or her own play.

Playwriting: The Structure of Action, Revised and Expanded Edition. (2005). By Sam Smiley and Norman Bert. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, ISBN 0300107242. 336 pages, \$19.95.

For those who want a more advanced experience with playwriting this book is a good choice. While it does not work from a how-to format, it covers many of the same topics as the previous book, but from a more poetic position. This book helps add polish to the basic elements of plays, and will enhance your child's ability to write a good script.

Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting. (1997). By Robert McKee. New York: Regan Books, ISBN 0060391685. 480 pages, hardcover, \$35.00.

This is the quintessential primer for anyone interested in writing a script to be made into a movie. It covers all the major elements of scriptwriting and provides more advanced ideas for polishing a script to make it marketable. While it may seem a little lofty at times, the intent is not only to make everyone capable of writing a script, but inspired to write a brilliant one.

Creating Unforgettable Characters. By Linda Segar. New York: Owl Books, ISBN 0805011714. 256 pages, paperback, \$15.00.

The backbone of any good story is good characters; however, writing effective, believable characters can be one of the hardest tasks a writer will face. This book attempts to help writers of scripts understand the process of writing good characters to bind their stories together. This resource is intended to be a how-to for novice writers.

Directing/Filming

Once a script or screenplay has been written, a director usually gets involved and attempts to create an artistic vision for the play or movie that can be shared with others involved in the production.

The Director's Eye: A Comprehensive Textbook for Directors and Actors. (2001). By John Ahart. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Publishing, ISBN 1566080711. 347 pages, paperback, \$24.95.

This is one of the finest books ever written about directing a play. It helps distinguish between merely staging a play, having the characters get up on stage and say their lines, and directing a play, marrying the actions of the actors with the words of the author. This is a great book for anyone interested in directing.

Directing Actors: Creating Memorable Performances for Film & Television. (1999). By Judith Weston. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, ISBN 0941188248. 300 pages, paperback, \$26.95

Directing for movies is markedly different than directing for the stage and this book is an excellent place to start learning the differences. It offers explicit advice about how to direct actors, as well as ways to ensure that the vision a director has for a script is being fully realized.

Film Directing Shot by Shot: Visualizing from Concept to Screen (1991). By Steven D. Katz Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, ISBN 0941188108. 325 pages, paperback, \$27.95.

Another aspect of directing films is to make sure the image the viewer sees matches what the director intended for the film. Movie directors have the sacred duty of carrying the vision from their mind onto the screen and this book provides a step-by-step manual for making shots and scenes that flow together.

Technical Theater

Behind every good play or movie are the countless costumers, makeup artists, set designers and lighting specialists who ensure that each scene is as authentic and convincing as possible.

Costume Design 101. (2001). By Richard E. La Motte. Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, ISBN 0941188353. 180 pages, paperback, \$19.95

For those just beginning in stage costume design, this book is an invaluable source of information. It is comprehensive and thorough in its description of how to design costumes for given

productions, how to create those designs, and how to store the costumes once the production is over.

Costume Design. (2003). By Debora N. Landis. Woburn, MA: Focal Press, ISBN 0240805909. 176 pages, paperback, \$43.95.

Costuming for movies is different than producing costumes for the stage and this book does a nice job of elucidating the differences and providing a practical guide for costuming films. Using professional costumers as guides, this book attempts to provide a foundation for good costuming.

Stage Makeup: The Actor's Complete Guide to Today's Techniques and Materials. (1999). By Laura Thudlum. Back Stage Books, ISBN 0823088391. Paperback, 160 pages, \$35.00.

Once a costume has been created, an actor can put on the makeup that will complete the look. This book is a beginner's guide to stage makeup, which can be translated into makeup for movies, including analyzing facial features, creating a profile image, applying the makeup, and caring for one's skin.

Technical Theater for Nontechnical People. (2004). By Drew Campbell. New York: Allworth Press, ISBN 1581153449. 275 pages, paperback, \$19.95.

The very foundation of a good play or movie is a stage to perform on. In this book the reader will find everything he or she needs to know about designing and building a set, lighting the set, and using the right props. This is a complete guide for anyone interested in learning more about technical theater.

Technical Film and TV for Nontechnical People. (2002). By Drew Campbell. New York Allworth Press, ISBN 1581152299. 256 pages, paperback, \$19.95.

While many of the technical elements of stage design are similar for both the stage and movies, that is where the similarities end; movies may require complex sound control, the use of a camera, and difficult lighting situations. These specific concerns are covered in the companion book for film. This is a cogent and approachable book that provides the basics for shooting a movie.

Acting

There is no substitute for the real thing in this category. Every child who is interested in acting, whether it be on the stage or screen, should take a chance and join a children's theater company. The camaraderie that can be fostered and friendships made are invaluable. And the best way to learn to be an actor is to practice the art and skill of acting in a safe and supportive environment.

Participating in a theater company also offers the unique opportunity to actually get on the stage or screen in plays, musicals, or movies produced by the company. While theater companies generally charge for acting lessons, it is a worthy expense to ensure that your child is given the best opportunity to learn and grow as an actor.

When picking a theater company, consult with other parents, see one of their productions, and talk to the instructor as well as manager to ensure that it is going to provide the types of opportunities and experiences that your child is ready for. Not all theater companies are created equal, and your child should be in the company that best matches his or her acting goals and expectations.

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Putting It All Together

Play Director's Survival Kit: A Complete Step-by-Step Guide to Producing Theater in Any School or Community Setting. (1997). By James W. Rodgers and Wanda C. Rodgers. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, ISBN 0876285655. 304 pages, paperback, \$29.95.

While this book is generally directed toward theater teachers, the resources and information are extremely valuable for everyone interested in producing a stage play. The book moves from selecting a play to pre-production and continues all the way through rehearsals and performances. This is a thorough and comprehensive guide for anyone who is still learning how to go through the process of staging a production.

Complete Guide to Making a Movie. (2006). By Lorene Wales. Boston: Longman, ISBN 0205507220. 293 pages, paperback, \$24.95.

Both of these books are great overall guides to making a movie or putting on a play. They cover the basics of how to plan for a production, how to find the right people to help, and how to advertise the premiere once the production is ready to be shared with an audience.

Online Resources

Costuming

<http://www.costuming.org/>

<http://www.costumepage.org/>

Makeup

http://everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=929810

<http://www.fabjob.com/makeupartist.asp>

Directing & Producing

<http://www.oldandsold.com/articles25/play-directing-11.shtml>

<http://stats.bls.gov/oco/ocos093.htm>

<http://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/spd130et/director.htm>

Screenwriting

<http://www.oscars.org/teachersguide/screenwriting/download.html>

<http://radified.com/Screenwriting/screenwriting.htm> (brief, but good)

Acting Games

http://www.phillipmartin.info/liberia/text_play_actinggames.htm

http://www.humanpingpongball.com/improv_games.html

<http://www.learnimprov.com/>

Author Note. Chris Gilman is a doctoral student in educational psychology (gifted education emphasis) at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Virginia.