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 Herberg-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.


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.


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 syncing, 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.


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.


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 adds polish to the basic elements of plays, and will enhance your child's ability to write a good script.

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.


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 is 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.


This is one of the finest books ever written about directing a play. It helps distinguish between merely staging a play, having the director's mind onto the screen and this book provides a step-by-step viewer sees matches what the director intended for the film. This book is an excellent place to start learning the art and skill of acting in a safe and supportive environment.


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.


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.


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.


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.


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.


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.

*continued on page 30*
Learning at Home
continued from page 27

Putting It All Together

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.


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://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/

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