

Dramatic flair develops key skills for students

written by Malea Hargett |



Elementary schools offer drama programs as a way to promote greater self-esteem and public speaking skills in their students, four Catholic school teachers said.

Our Lady of Fatima School in Benton, St. Joseph School in Paris, St. Joseph School in Fayetteville and St. Edward School in Little Rock are not producing plays to improve the students' acting, dancing or singing. They want the students to learn more about literature and plays and build community and teamwork among the students, the teachers said. As a result of putting on plays once or twice a year, many of the students are now comfortable serving as lectors and altar servers during Mass.

Jan Cash, principal at Our Lady of Fatima School, has been working with sixth, seventh and eighth graders for several years and coaching them in writing and acting in their own original play. "A Charming Tale," which incorporated characters from "Peter Pan," "Gilligan's Island" and "Jack and the Beanstalk," was presented during two evenings of dinner theater in February. The student body was invited to attend the dress rehearsal.

In addition to Cash's principal duties, she teaches 24 students who are required to assist with the play as part of their literature class. Each fall the students read plays and study the elements of fiction. After returning from Christmas break, Cash guides the students in writing a play in three weeks. They are also responsible for creating the set, taking care of their props and selling tickets. If a costume isn't in the school's wardrobe closet, students volunteer to bring in old Halloween costumes.

In their play, Cash makes sure the students develop the characters, establish the setting and make sure the plot can be followed.

"They brainstorm and I am there to direct," Cash said. "They all have at least one part. Some kids play several. Everybody gets to act and be on stage."

For the Feb. 22-23 performances, about 225 people attended the dinners.

While other schools host only one performance, Cash said the Benton students insist on having at least one dress rehearsal and two shows.

"The kids are kind of let down when they only get to do one performance," she said.

Cash said the younger students enjoy watching the show.

"They look up to them as stars," she said. "It gives self-confidence and self-esteem to the older kids."

Brother James Lindsey, OSB, religion and drama teacher in Paris, worked with about 10 students in second to fifth grades to perform a show at Christmas. In December the students hosted a "dessert theater" for their parents and fellow students. Last school year the drama club met after school and performed the comedy, "Murder, Mayhem and Marshmallow Salad." This school year Brother James decided to develop a clown troupe similar to one he worked with at Subiaco Academy. The students did the show as mimes and retold the Christmas story. The monk wrote the play based on New Testament Scriptures. Students who were interested in drama were asked to give up their recess period three times a week for six weeks to practice. "My idea is to get our kids the experience," he said. "I want them to know that live drama is better than TV."

Brother James said skills they develop in the play "kind of spill over" into other areas, including Mass.

"They are getting used to speaking in public," he said. "Some are apprehensive of speaking in front of people."

Martha Molina, art, choir and drama teacher in Fayetteville, said her students have been performing adaptations of Shakespearean plays for about eight years. Sixth and seventh graders who take Molina's choir/ drama class put on two productions, one in December and one in May. Many of the plays are written or adapted by Molina.

Before the Christmas break, 22 students performed "A New Scrooge," Molina's modern "Christmas Carol," at the Jones Center in Springdale. The play tackled topics like lead poisoning in toys and materialism.

"It was thoughtful," she said.

Each spring a different play by Shakespeare, including "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and "Much Ado About Nothing," is performed for parents. On May 7 the class is presenting "Twelfth Night," also at the Jones Center. While the play is condensed down to 45 minutes, the dialogue is delivered in rhyming couplets with 17th century-style costumes.

Molina said she wishes all students at the school could develop the valuable skills from memorizing lines, speaking in public and working with their friends in a non-competitive way. "They learn to focus," she said. "I see a huge difference in those who can focus ... They do such a good job. Once you teach them the methods, those kids are so good. You can teach them to ad lib."

She said drama/choir students are more accepting of each other's mistakes and expand their social circles.

"It's pretty much what our school should be like," Molina said.

St. Edward School takes a different approach by presenting a Christian musical each May. "We are United" will be performed May 2 during the day for the student body and at night for about 80 parents. The \$1 admission fee includes dessert and coffee.

All third to eighth graders are invited to audition for solos and speaking parts.

"Everyone (who auditions) is allowed to be in the play," said Melissa Green, fifth grade teacher who also directs the annual productions.

Green said the musical provides the opportunity for 20 students to practice their singing, dancing and acting skills as well as learn about their faith. The current production requires the students to learn nine songs and most of them are choreographed as well.

"Kids who might not be able to express themselves with sports, cheerleading or academics are able to express themselves in drama," she said.