

# CHILD'S PLAY:

## Children's Theater in Evanston



Mary Poppins

*'The object of Art is to give life a shape,' ... William Shakespeare*

BY JUDY CHISS

Ninety-five years ago, Winifred Louise Ward from Eldora, Iowa, put children's theater and Evanston, Ill., on the map. In 1918, at a time when few women attended college or worked outside the home, Miss Ward had received her undergraduate degree from Northwestern University and Ph.D. from the University of Chicago before joining the faculty of Northwestern to teach in the Department of Oratory.

To theater students and teachers, Miss Ward is affectionately known as the "Mother of Creative Drama," because she envisioned and launched ground-breaking programs based on what children spontaneously do: pretend as they play.

*The play's the thing':*

### Miss Ward and the Realm of Make-Believe

As an assistant professor, Miss Ward introduced a new field of education that she called "creative drama," a method of teaching drama with and for children. Her method emphasizes process and includes non-performance storytelling, sensory memory exercises, role-playing, pantomime and finally,



Winifred Ward

unscripted dialogue between thoughtfully explored characters.

The method Winifred Ward pioneered at Northwestern and in District 65 schools is thriving today in thousands of classrooms and community theater programs across the country.

*See first that the design is wise and just; that ascertained, pursue it resolutely':*

### Creative Drama in the Evanston Schools

Evanston's strong youth theater programs and venues date from the 1920s. Between 1925 and 1950 Winifred Ward taught creative drama to Northwestern students, but her creative influence expanded beyond the campus when in 1924 she was made supervisor of the newly developed creative drama curricula in the Evanston schools. She first tried out her creative education theories in an Orrington School classroom. For 30 years Miss Ward and then her successors – Rita Christie, Barbara McIntyre, and Anne Thurman – trained drama specialists to teach creative dramatics to fourth- through eighth-graders in Evanston's public schools.

### A Theater Company, a Vision Realized

Miss Ward's other major contribution was founding a successful theater company in Evanston, one that used both college-aged and younger students in the production and performance of rehearsed, scripted plays based on children's literature. At the same time that District 65 was incorporating the curricula of creative drama in the schools, the Children's Theatre of Evanston opened its doors to the public. In 1925, the curtain rose on the proud result of the first theater collaboration between Northwestern University's Speech Department (formerly School of Oration), and Evanston's public schools – a collaboration Miss Ward facilitated. The play "Snow White" entertained CTE's first ticketed audience on Nov. 6, 1925, at Annie May Swift Hall auditorium on Northwestern's campus.

### NU and D65, Onstage Together

Miss Ward announced that the project had the "double purpose of providing a worthy service to Evanston and giving the Speech students [at Northwestern] a laboratory in the study of theater for youth." As early as 1929, 765 children were enrolled in Creative Dramatics in the Evanston schools, and Northwestern



theater students were acting in and assisting with the Children's Theatre productions in partnership with Evanston's elementary students. Northwestern's campus drama club, the Thalian Club, and the Evanston PTAs contributed both volunteer and material support. They ushered, monitored performances, provided supplies and sold tickets. For a period of time, the public purchased performance tickets in the fountain pen section of the iconic Chandler's store on Grove and Sherman streets.

Initially, Northwestern's School of Speech picked up the bill for the CTE program, although box office receipts from the fully subscribed first performances reimbursed all expenses and even provided some funding for season two. The community had clearly endorsed this new genre of theatre, in which junior-high-aged children were both actors and audience members. Northwestern theater students also acted in, directed, stage-designed, and helped manage the productions. Winifred Ward's vision was a success, and Ralph Dennis, then dean of the School of Speech, said that "probably no phase of the work of this school has won more praise and aroused more interest – and all around the country – than the work of Miss Winifred Ward in the field of creative dramatics for children."

Over time, just as the term "creative drama" evolved into the

more common title of "creative dramatics," other changes occurred. Evanston Children's Theatre changed its name in 1927 to the Children's Theatre of Evanston, and then in 1966 to Theatre 65. Productions moved to the Evanston junior high auditoriums, primarily Haven's, and eventually Evanston Public Schools took over the funding of the Children's Theatre. In 1968 Theatre 65 formed a touring company, the same year that committed high school students assumed the role of stage crew and auxiliary work force for Theatre 65. However, in 1971, just as the company was achieving more of its potential, District 65 budget constraints resulted in withdrawal of funding and the eventual folding of Theatre 65.

### Miss Ward's Legacy in Evanston Schools

Education budget cuts have reordered curriculum priorities across the country; in Evanston drama and other fine arts programs have been cut and reinstated numerous times since the 1970s. The District 65 School Board eliminated drama for some grades in 2001, then voted in 2012 to reinstate theater arts for all K-8 students.

But the spirit of Winifred Ward is alive in Betsy Quinn, who has for 25 years been the Arts Department Chair at Haven Middle School, chair

of District 65's Drama Department and an adjunct professor of theater at Northwestern. Like Miss Ward, Betsy Quinn thinks "drama walks through the door with the child." Whether second-graders are imagining being the Troll in "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" or a seventh-grader is depicting a Civil Rights activist marching with Dr. King, Ms. Quinn emphasizes that theater activities "are about empathy and walking in someone else's shoes."

The Northwestern and District 65 partnership is alive and well. Winifred Ward facilitated a cooperative and productive theatre relationship between the Evanston schools and Northwestern that Betsy Quinn and her colleagues still maintain for the benefit of all. District 65 middle-schoolers have access to free drama classes at Northwestern; Northwestern theater students intern with Evanston's drama teachers; well-known NU Associate Professor Rives Collins both performs and leads teacher professional development programs for the District; and Evanston elementary students audition for youth productions presented by Northwestern's Theatre and Interpretation Center.

Touched by the genius of Winifred Ward nearly a century ago, Evanston today can see her imprint on its remarkable array of theater opportunities for young people. ▶



*Madam,  
how like you  
this play?:*

*"Mary Poppins," page 12, and "The Emperor's New Clothes," left, were early performances of the Children's Theatre of Evanston. Photos courtesy of Northwestern University archives.*

*All subhead quotes are from William Shakespeare.*





*Be not afraid of greatness':*

### **Piven Theatre Workshop**

Piven is a household name in Evanston, and the Piven Theatre Workshop founded by Byrne and Joyce Piven recently celebrated 40 years here. Piven has always been more than a theater company presenting plays; it is and has been a highly respected training ground for actors, young and old, even before it officially became a not-for-profit arts organization in 1978.

Joyce and Byrne Piven transferred their tremendous amount of theater experience to teaching both children and adult students. Their involvement with Chicago's Playwrights' Theatre, Compass Players, and Second City was a solid foundation for opening Piven Theatre Workshop. From first informally teaching young people in their Evanston neighborhood and community (while they were also actively parenting their now-famous children, Jeremy and Shira), they expanded their vision to an array of programs that move students from the classroom to the stage.

Byrne Piven left a vibrant legacy when he died in 2002, and today the Piven Theatre Workshop enrollment approaches 1,000 students annually, with 83-year-old Joyce Piven still an active part of the organization she and her husband birthed.

"We at Piven Theatre Workshop take young artists as seriously as we take adult artists," said Piven alum and current Artistic Director Jen Green. "We honor the young artist's voice, and nothing is dialed down for the children who study here." Under the mentorship of experienced theater professionals, fourth- through 12th-grade Piven students explore the aspects of acting adult actors

during the school year and a full series of summer camps with descriptors such as "Mudlarkian Longform: Adapt Anything" and "Acting for the Camera." The sell-out, three-week summer camp culminates in a performance, often Shakespearean, at Ridgeville Park, and the flagship show every year is "Mud Pies," a student-written production.

hone: improvisation, scene study, creative play, character development, expansion of vocal and physical range and ensemble-building. An impressive number of legendary theatrical success stories have emerged from the Piven Theatre Workshop alumni roster, including John, Joan and Ann Cusack; Hope Davis; Aidan Quinn; Emilie Beck; Sarah Ruhl; and Shira and Jeremy Piven. Stagebill has called the Pivens "Chicago's first family of acting."



*Hold the mirror up to nature':*

### **Mudlark Theater Reaches High**

Newer on the Evanston scene, Mudlark and Piccolo theaters offer vibrant youth theater programs. The brains, creativity, and energy behind Mudlark are Andrew Biliter, artistic director, and Michael Miro, executive director, friends and theater colleagues who met when they were in their early 20s and working for Evanston's Ridgeville Park District. Like many theater companies, Mudlark is a bit of a vagabond entity; it rents office and rehearsal space in a church facility and produces seven or eight shows a season at different theater venues around town. Mudlark was founded in 2005 by local actress Amy Eaton and continues to produce shows with casts of 18-24 youth actors.

"We do original adaptations of classic literature," said Mr. Biliter, "and we like to think of it as theater for everyone, not just children. We've done a version of 'Antigone,' of Kafka's 'The Trial' and of Louis Carroll's 'Through the Looking Glass.' We like to challenge the kids and the audience, too."

Mudlark's offerings are ambitious and diverse: after-school classes

during the school year and a full series of summer camps with descriptors such as "Mudlarkian Longform: Adapt Anything" and "Acting for the Camera." The sell-out, three-week summer camp culminates in a performance, often Shakespearean, at Ridgeville Park, and the flagship show every year is "Mud Pies," a student-written production.

*With mirth and laughter  
let old wrinkles come':*

### **Playing for Laughs at Piccolo Theatre**

Piccolo Theatre characterizes itself as "Small Theatre Big Laughs." Piccolo was founded 12 years ago and has been located for the last 10 years in a cozy second-floor site adjacent to the Main Street Metra tracks. This theater delivers comedy in many hilarious forms, including the classic Italian commedia dell'arte and British Panto genres. But in addition to its full season of family and adult fare, Piccolo offers youth programming for 10- to 15-year-olds. School vacations, summers and Saturdays are slotted for kids' comedy arts.



Tony Lawry, programming and outreach director, is a veteran of comedy and mentor to young comedic artists who says he would like to "see more dramatic comedy integrated into the public schools. The team-building and ensemble work are so relevant for middle-school- and high-school-aged kids," he said, "and one of our workshops features girls only."

Though a bit tricky to access, Piccolo Theatre's location is memorable. Visitors or participants can enter through the Uncommon Grounds Café



at the top and on the west side of the Metra tracks at Main Street – and stop for a coffee or snacks before having some laughs in the intimate 50-seat theater.



*'It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves':*

### Leadership Lessons for Brilliant Teens

For 62 years the McGaw YMCA has provided an open participation theater experience for high school students. Brillianteen (originally called Torch Division Shows) was launched in 1952, the same year Queen Elizabeth took the throne

and gasoline cost 20 cents a gallon at Evanston pumps. Brillianteen was designed to emphasize participation over competition, and to this day the program has a no-cut policy and casts every student who tries out – 200 of them in 2012.

The Brillianteen model has evolved from one involving many adult volunteer leaders to one wholly committed to youth leadership and the kids' running the show. Cindi Shuneman, dedicated Brillianteen choreographer and unofficial "housemother" for 29 years, is now just an occasional advisor to Brillianteen and a grandmother to a teenager old enough to be a cast in the 2014 spring production, "Footloose."

"I always have loved that Brillianteen shows operate with an expandability that makes sure everyone can have a part," Ms. Shuneman said. "Out of the 130-160 or more kids who signed up, usually only 10 to 15 were truly 'theater kids' who had been cast in high school or other shows.

Brillianteen has always managed to put on great shows in a way that cut across popularity lines." Since 2012 it has shifted its organization so that the high school students make almost every major decision for the year's production, including show selection, casting, choreography, lighting and sound design and production, stage and box office management, marketing and social media oversight.

"This is about leadership development, and the Y is putting its money where its mouth is," said Sarita Smith, manager of Middle and High School Initiatives at the Y and a 15-year veteran YMCA employee raised in Evanston. "I was overwhelmed by the dedication of the 23 kids on the Showboard, the leadership they showed and how they executed the big jobs they took on." During the 62 years of musical productions, "Guys and Dolls" sang and tap-danced its way to the Brillianteen stage more than any other show – five times in all. The roster of past shows is a trip down musical memory lane. ▶



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*How well he's read, to reason  
against reading':*

### At EPL dramatizing Banned Books

The Main Library's second-floor teen Loft has a reputation for creative programming, and the impassioned all-teen troupe called B.O.O.K. has evolved from a book discussion group to an ensemble that adapts and dramatizes well-loved books to the stage.

Jarett Dapier, part-time staffer in Teen Services at the EPL, is the articulate adult facilitator of B.O.O.K. and says, "Long after one of their productions, teens continue to talk about how meaningful the experience was." Celebrating freedom to read, these teen productions are staged during Banned Book Week. In 2010 the show was based on "The Sledding Hill," a gut-wrenching, personalized history of censorship told from a teen's point of view. The more recent black-box production was an adaptation of Walter Dean Meyers' novel "The Beast," performed on a simple and unadorned stage in memory of Dajae Coleman, the 14-year-old Evanston teen who was shot to death in September 2012. Mr. Dapier sums up the impact of the troupe's annual theater production by saying, "Because of the strong effect of the whole process of going from book to stage, I think we're 90 percent successful before we even present the show."

### 'O, sir! you are old': Teens and Elders Swap Stories at Fleetwood

Youth programming offered by Fleetwood Jourdain Center is under the umbrella of the City of Evanston and is an impressive example of community collaboration. FJC's Teen Drama Club, the summer theater camps, and the multi-generational YSTEP theater ensemble use multiple sites in town (the 150-seat theater at Noyes Cultural Arts Center and performance spaces at Levy Senior Center and at Fleetwood Jourdain). Second Baptist Church and Beth Emet Synagogue have been collaborators in an ambitious FJC Southern Freedom Riders Trail field trip for teens, a bus adventure resulting in an FJC dramatized storytelling production. Professional musicians frequently collaborate

with young people to teach and make music, and the Teen Drama Club members collaborate with visiting professional performing artists.

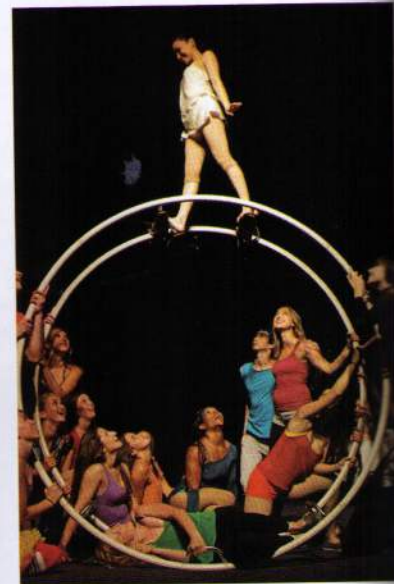
Tim Rhoze, artistic director of Fleetwood Jourdain's theater for the past three years, is especially fond of the intergenerational program that combines oral histories with theatre. "YSTEP (Youth and Seniors Theatre Ensemble Project) brings 12- to 19-year-olds together with folks over 55. "What could be better than enjoying a meal from Hecky's and sharing our life stories?" he asked, describing how the group collaborates again later to craft the stories into a one-act play presented at the Fleetwood Jourdain Theatre at Noyes Cultural Arts Center.

*'I fly because it releases my mind from the  
tyranny of petty things':*

### Up in the Air at the Actors Gymnasium

Being suspended on a loopy rope or a trapeze high in the air must be very appealing to a lot of people – the evidence being the success of The Actors Gymnasium. This Evanston not-for-profit teaches close to a thousand folks a year to do challenging physical feats such as unicycling, stilt-walking, tumbling, spinning on an aerial hoop, tightrope walking or synchronized jump roping to music. Since 1995 the company has taught both adults and kids and entertained thousands of people annually at performances, festivals

and special events. Their home is the high-ceilinged but intimate performance auditorium at the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, although the Actors Gymnasium contortionists, sword-fighters, trapeze artists, jugglers and other circus and performance artists also make appearances at hundreds of other venues in the Chicago area.



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Actors Gymnasium Theatre began as a training ground for actors from Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre, to help artists develop their physical skills. Now it is a unique hybrid organization that both teaches and performs original works of circus-theater.

"We use physical theater to tell a story," said Kiana Simon, director of marketing and event entertainment. "The shows we produce are original, family-friendly, and showcase the challenging skills students develop. I'm inspired when I see what they do."

The Actors Gym offers a large roster of workshops and classes for youth 3-18 years old, and the two sessions of summer camp for 9- to 15- year-olds fill their 154 student slots by December. During the four-week camp sessions, students rotate

through workshops in circus arts, drama and movement – and produce a show that packs the house each summer. The camp is directed by one of the Actors Gym co-founders, talented choreographer and second-generation circus performer Sylvia Hernandez-DiStasi, whose resumé lists tours with both Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus.

*So wise so young':*

### The Student Comedians of YAMO

It would take a football field to hold all the alums and audience members of the ETHS YAMO show since its inception. 2013 marks the 55th anniversary of the high school's YAMO, the musical and comedic extravaganza written, directed, choreographed, designed, costumed, stage crewed, managed and acted by ETHS students.

The Theatre Department, headed by Aaron Carney, offers five theater classes and presents between six and eight shows a year.

### *What's past is prologue': Miss Ward's Spell*

Winifred Ward's impact on Evanston endures. In addition to the wealth of theater venues in the community, the library, Evanston History Center and Northwestern University have archived materials about her. Kevin Leonard, Northwestern archivist and assistant director of Special Collections, says, "The theater students who use the archival collection always refer to Winifred Ward as 'Miss Ward' and are so genuinely emotional about her that they sometimes have tears in their eyes. It's like they had a spell cast on them, I swear." ■



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