

## So you want to act? - Studios train teens to be real performers

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### The Scoop

- The Actors Gymnasium in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes, Evanston. Call (847) 328-2795

- Eileen Boevers Performing Arts Workshop, 595 Elms Place, Suite 211, Highland Park. Call (847) 432-8223

- Piven Theatre Workshop in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, 927 Noyes, Evanston. Call (847) 866-6597

As kids, Anne and Joan Cusack loved to put on shows. But the accompanying household disruptions - the purloined sheets, the missing towels, the turned over furniture - became too much, and their mother tired of the home theatrics. So she looked around for a place where her girls could take acting classes from reputable teachers.

For parents, this is a dilemma. They don't want just anyone to teach their kids; yet, acting attracts so many charlatans and cranks that parents have to be careful who they entrust their children to.

Which may explain why, a little more than 25 years ago, Nancy Cusack turned to her actress friend Joyce Piven and talked her into starting a class at the Evanston Art Center. Piven and her husband, Byrne, were already leading improvisation acting workshops for adults. So it was a simple matter to make a few age-appropriate adjustments and offer classes for youngsters.

The class turned out to be very popular. And so the Piven Theatre Workshop was born.

It didn't hurt that Joyce Piven's first class included such future lights of theater and Hollywood as Joan Cusack, Anne Cusack and her own daughter, Shira Piven. Or that Piven was teaching the same kind of hip, Spolin-style theater games that had put Second City and Paul Sills' Story Theater on the map.

Today the Piven's head up a busy acting school in Evanston's Noyes Cultural Arts Center, with a staff of over 22 teachers, hundreds of students - children, teenagers, and adults - and a thriving, well regarded Young People's Company, where the best of Piven's students are given a chance to spread their wings in professional and semiprofessional settings: libraries, school auditoriums, children's matinees.

"There is a myth that children are natural actors," Byrne Piven says, by way of explaining the Piven's educational philosophy. "They aren't."

By the time children are 9 and old enough to take classes, Piven says, they have already begun to learn the bad habits - the conformity and harsh self-criticism - that inhibit creativity.

To encourage creativity, the Piven Workshop teaches an eclectic mixture of Spolin Improv games and Stanislavsky "Method" Acting, tailor made to the needs of each class.

How successful are their techniques? The list of illustrious Piven alums, which includes Joan and John Cusack, Aidan Quinn, Rosanna Arquette and Lili Taylor, speaks for itself.

The Eileen Boevers Performing Arts Workshop may not boast of as many famous alumni as the Piven workshop, but its affiliation with the well-regarded Apple Tree Theater helps to attract teachers who are among the brightest lights in Chicago theater.

For a long time Ross Lehman, a local musical comedy star now performing on Broadway, was on staff at the Workshop. And the current staff includes songwriter Eric Lane Barnes, whose musical revue "Fairy Tales" is going strong at an Off-Broadway theater in New York.

Even more important, though, is that like the Pivens, Boevers began her workshop as a labor of love, devoted to children.

Boevers, a trained director with a background in educational theater, literally started the workshop in her basement 25 years ago at the insistence of a friend with kids who desperately wanted to study acting.

Since then the school has developed into a multidisciplinary performing arts academy, offering classes in dance, voice and acting for all age groups, from kindergarten through high school. During the summer, the school hosts a "teen camp" in the afternoons, as well as offering performing arts camps for the Deerfield Park District and the Park District of Highland Park.

Boevers estimates that every year 800 to 1,000 students study at her school.

One of the most popular courses at the workshop, "The Triple Threat," underscores the completeness of the school's curriculum. In this two-hour class the student gets to work with a dance teacher, a voice instructor and a drama coach, spending forty minutes with each, with the goal of developing into what Broadway has dubbed a "triple threat," a performer who can sing, dance, and act.

Its no wonder, Apple Tree casts many of its children's parts from the students at the Workshop.

Still, Boevers, whose own daughter graduated from the program and is currently performing on Broadway in "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," downplays the pre-professional side to their training program.

"Its important that the training be age appropriate," she explains, "But its important not to pander to children. A lot of people think you have to simplify to the point of being babyish. But kids are happier when you don't underestimate their abilities."

No one would ever accuse the folks at the Actor's Gymnasium of underestimating the abilities of young performers. At this young theater school, founded two years ago in the Noyes Cultural Center, students can immerse themselves in such intensely physical, "death defying" circus arts as tightrope walking, trapeze work, and other assorted skills including unicycle riding and twirling on a rope. The curriculum also includes an interesting combination of gymnastics and storytelling called Imaginastics.

"We like to offer classes you can't get anywhere else," notes Gymnasium co-founder Sylvia Hernandez. The school's director, Tony Adler, points out that although the school offers classes for adults, "we encourage young people to take our classes. They're stronger, healthier, and seem to get more out of them."

Hernandez, who grew up in a circus family before making the switch to theater, agrees, noting that she has seen shy students blossom after learning how to walk on stilts or fly on the trapeze.

With a staff made up of some of Chicago's most inventive and experimental theater companies, including Lookingglass, the Midnight Circus, JellyEye and the Blue Rider Theater, the Actor's Gymnasium offers the hippest place for students to learn about theater.

And, since the Actor's Gymnasium operates in the same building as the Piven Theater Workshop, students in one get a discount on classes in the other.

Many parents may not believe this, but sometimes teenagers need help acting up. These three suburban acting studios not only provide that help, they provide teens with the discipline they need to transform adolescent clowning into real performance.

**Caption:** Jeremy Piven, right, and John Cusack, with Lauren Katz in "Ready or Not," a 1985 Piven Theatre Workshop production. Eileen Boevers: She has the triple threat covered.

**Memo:** Series: Generation 2000

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