

Q &A with *The New York Children's Theater Festival*

Co-Founder Michael Shawn Lewis

The founders of the festival have all been involved in children's entertainment throughout your careers. Where do you believe there needs to be more focus currently when it comes to live entertainment for kids?

Development. I think if we want to continue being a true leader globally in children's theater, we have to continue cultivating exciting new opportunities for artists in the industry. There is obviously huge professional artistic talent, and not enough of it is given a chance to shine. There are great offerings of live theater for young audiences in NYC and larger cities across the country, but a big portion of quality new live entertainment is being imported from abroad. The two main purposes for us coming together to create this non-profit festival are first, to form a high-profile showcase opportunity for brilliant creators of children's theater to have their work seen by an audience in the Big Apple, and second, to provide key developmental opportunities for them by offering workshops, lectures and eventually grants.

Families in NYC and the Tri-State area are always hungry for a great new theatrical experience and that provides the perfect platform for our festival. The excitement of live theater gives kids unforgettable memories, and often nurtures an inner voice that allows them to tap into their own creativity. It really is pure joy.

What shows and stage experiences do the founders of the festival believe are the best out there right now?

There are a number of great examples here in NYC right now on many different scales. I am personally partial to brand new original works, so I love a lot of creativity that the New Victory is presenting. Great things are happening over at the MMAC. And it is always exciting to see a visionary producer like Daryl Roth create the DR2 for kids. *John Tartaglia's ImaginOcean* (tooting my own show's horn a little!) is a wonderful piece and attracted kids with puppets, music, and a story of friendship. Simple and powerful. And of course, nobody does large scale fun quality theater magic like Disney.

What is your earliest memory of a live theater experience from your childhood and how did it make you feel?

It's funny, this is actually one of the reasons that creating great children's theater is so important to me. Growing up as a farm boy in rural northeast Tennessee, I never had the opportunity to see a real live show. I remember grabbing my mom's wooden cooking spoon as a microphone and running around the house making shows up on the spot. It was not until I was in high school, after my family moved to Florida, that I had my first opportunity to see large scale live theater --- *My Fair Lady*. It was pure magic. I remember the thrill and rush of watching such an amazing thing. Almost immediately I joined a youth players group. The rest is history.

My festival co-founder **Renee Barnett** says, "My earliest memory of live theater was being in shows at church where we did adaptations of Disney movies. My first was *The Jungle Book* when I was five-years-old, wore a bear costume, and did a little dance. I was in those shows from Kindergarten through Middle School. I loved going on field trips to see live theater throughout my school years, and it was always magical and exciting. There is something about the lights going down and being transported to a totally different place... I cherished every show

I saw and thought actors were the most incredible people. I loved meeting them after the shows and seeing they were actually real people. I think it was inevitable that I would eventually become one of those actors!"

Chelsey Shannon, our other festival co-founder says, "I have been immersed in theater since a very young age because my entire family is made up of performers. One of my first experiences was watching my older brother play Michael Darling in *Peter Pan* at the Pittsburgh Playhouse. It was magical. I remember the urgency in clapping to make Tinker Bell better and the smoke that washed over the stage into the audience as the crocodile entered. I absolutely could not believe it when I saw my brother fly. A happy thought was all it took, and up he flew. It was pure magic. After the show I met the entire cast and the actress playing Peter Pan handed me a pouch of Fairy Dust – my dream come true. I would go on to perform in the Playhouse's production of *Working* the following semester -- I was five and it was more of a cameo, but I remember it vividly. These experiences at the Playhouse were so profound that thirteen years later I would perform again on the same stage as an acting student at Point Park University. "

As a children's entertainment consultant, how do you feel about children's television programming these days?

The quantity and quality of children's television programming continues to increase around the globe. However, there are still gaps between programs that nurture and develop the minds of kids and programs that just serve as "brain candy." There is a time and place for everything, but personally I would like to see more excitement and innovation put back into the curricular aspect of children's programming.

Sesame Street is still the gold standard when it comes to treating children with respect and intelligence. And it incorporates actors, puppets, music, learning, as well as social/emotional curriculum -- very similar to live theater, which you do not often see on television. However, no screen -- television, computer, tablets -- no matter how good, can ever replace the experience of a live, in-person stage event. Live storytelling in every form is an extremely valuable tradition and makes deep impressions on young minds... and young at heart.

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