

Sisters Act

Siblings' experience dramatizes the value of children's theater | BY KIM COOPER FINDLING

My daughter sat at the edge of her seat, mesmerized by what was unfolding before her. We were watching a live performance of *Annie*, presented by the local children's theater, and Libby was so transfixed by the action on stage, I could tell what she was feeling: I want in on this.

For me, that was the joyful moment of witnessing my child discover her passion. Libby was 8 years old the day we saw *Annie*; she is now 11 and has acted in eight plays with the children's theater group. Her little sister, Maris, caught the acting bug, too, and has been in four plays. From *The Hobbit* to *The Little Mermaid*, from *James and the Giant Peach* to *Tarzan*, we've all been on this journey together.

The first play Libby participated in was *Alice in Wonderland*. She landed a role as the Three of Diamonds, and we were off and running in our education about dramatic art. My third-grader had four days a week of rehearsals to attend, lines to memorize, and songs and choreography to learn. I was involved, too, creating the first spark of falling in love with theater myself. The children's theater is a grassroots effort. Parents are invited to participate in all the aspects of putting on a show.

At first I was utterly out of my element. I could barely sew on a button, let alone design costumes. I wouldn't trust me to run the stage lights. Carpentry for set design? Forget about it. But I could usher. I could sell concessions. I could volunteer backstage. I could help my daughters run lines, and run them again. In this way, I was allowed a window into the world of theater, which I quickly learned is a magical place of imagination, playfulness and community.

A group is assembled. They assume roles. They bond over weeks of words and movement. They become a little family. Lines are memorized. Dances are choreographed. Scenes come together. Fanciful costumes turn the actors into characters. Sets build from a blank slate to a beautiful microcosm on stage.

At some point during that first production, I became astonished at the effort poured into something that, by design, would never last. We were in a small town in Oregon, not on Broadway. Each show would be on stage for about a week, at most. But no one was holding back. Everyone was all-in on the whole wonderful enterprise.

Then opening night came, *Alice* bloomed on stage, and everything made sense. The energy backstage could have powered the lights in the theater all by itself. The audience members, filling the auditorium with their own enthusiasm, completed the show. Suddenly, it wasn't just make-believe. It was real. My eyes brimmed with tears. And I was only the usher.

Each show seems to race to its conclusion faster than Tarzan

swings to another tree. Mounting a production is intense and exhilarating and exhausting. Sometimes there is crying, but more often, there is laughing. Most of all there is love: love for each other, love for the thing we have created together, and love for sharing it with the world.

Theater is about the anticipated and the ephemeral. An astounding creation is crafted bit by bit, seemingly from nowhere. It is revealed in a brief flash of awesomeness. And then it is entirely disassembled. The scripts are returned to the shelf; the costumes are stored away. At the end of each show, a vacuum enters our lives in the place where the play was. But the show becomes a

piece of our past, a keepsake to tuck into our memory treasure chests.

Each daughter also has a physical theater-related memento box. They safeguard items such as a whelk shell from the set of *Lord of the Flies* and a felt banana from *Tarzan*. We have the purple heels Maris wore as the young kangaroo in *Seussical the Musical*, and a hilarious photo of Libby wearing a judge's wig to play Yertle the Turtle. We tuck these things carefully away, let ourselves be mopey for a time, and then move on. For at the conclusion of each play, the directors remind the children: "Don't cry that it's over. Smile that it happened."

There are so many things I have come to love about the theater, but perhaps my favorite is that its impermanence reminds us of the power of paying attention to beauty, no matter how fleeting. However brief a show's existence, there is great worth in the creation and life of the production. The point is to throw oneself headlong into life's positive moments—to realize that whether we're ushering people into a wonderful world of make-believe or we're singing with fellow female orphans about hope for tomorrow, every good experience changes and enhances our lives.

Kim Cooper Findling and her girls are gearing up for Elf Jr. at Beat Children's Theatre.

