

Backyard Broadway

Modjeska Theatre builds positive influences within the community as well as in its up-and-coming stars.

by Dawn Albrecht

From "Disney's High School Musical" to "Peter Pan," The Modjeska Youth Theatre Company gives kids in Milwaukee the opportunity to see quality children's theater in their own backyard. But that's not all. It also produces great role models and community members.

Located at 1134 W. Historic Mitchell Street in Milwaukee, The Modjeska offers youths the opportunity to expand their horizons beyond Mitchell Street, beyond Milwaukee and beyond themselves. The actors, ranging in age from 13 to 20, come from a diverse background. From first-time actors testing their stage legs to experienced actors ready to move onto a larger stage, the Modjeska brings them together in a tight-knit community that reaches beyond the doors of the theater.

"We are using the arts to reach kids and keep them in school, away from things that distract (crime, gangs, drugs) and bring an extremely diverse group — age, socio-economic, race, geography — of families and youth together in a very unique way," says Judy Smith, Executive Director of the Modjeska Youth Theatre Company.

The actors, including pictured Joseph Snyder, agree that being in the production helps keep them out of trouble and focused on school.

Serious roles

Being in a production at the Modjeska "drove me more to keep my grades up," says Mary Rodgers, 18. Rodgers started acting when she was 15 years old; she has been in 10 plays since. Grades, school attendance and practice attendance are taken very seriously by this budding group of actors. If they miss three rehearsals, they are cut from the cast. Even missing one rehearsal can make the actors feel like they're behind.

Falling behind at school isn't an option, either. With evening and some weekend rehearsals and having to keep their grades up to be allowed to participate, Marques Bradford, 17, brings homework to the theater. "Knowing I'm in the play means my grades have to stay up."

The young actors invest a lot of time and effort into the productions and get even more out of them. Rodgers believes that the Modjeska has helped her advance her acting skills and given her more confidence, a sentiment that most of her co-actors second. Victor Thomas, 17, was in "Disney's High School Musical" as his first play at the Modjeska and agrees with Rodgers. He also believes the Modjeska has helped him strengthen his work ethic. "I love acting. It's worth it 200 percent."

Bright lights

The Modjeska Youth Theatre Company greatly affects the lives of the youth involved in the production, and it also influences the lives of the people who attend their theatre. The actors know that they're role models to other aspiring actors in the audience. More than one has been approached by an audience member after a production to find out how to become part of the next performance.

"I think we're an example of what all students have the potential to do," says Diane Johnson, Artistic Director for the Modjeska for the last eight years. "It provides a great group of role models for their peers and shows how you can accomplish things through hard work and diligence."

"It's a big commitment," says Joseph Snyder, 20. Snyder has been in 18 plays since he was 15 years old. He gave up football and wrestling to be in the theater. But it was worth it "seeing the kids' reactions to the plays."

Big pictures

The influence of the Modjeska on its actors goes beyond being a thespian. Actors attend workshops at the Modjeska that help bring the realities of the world to their doorstep and help them relate to others. During preparation for a production, actors attend workshops based on the life skills featured in the current production. While preparing for "Annie," "We had the kids actually build a shack people in NY might have had to live in," says Johnson. Along with the visual and physical educational power of what the structure represented, the actors also learned a great deal about the historical aspect of the depression.

Along with the theatrical training and education, the Modjeska offers someone to listen. "We have a counselor who works with the students and comes to all rehearsals and performances," says Johnson. The counselor is available to help with any issue that might arise from the production and any outside issues that might be affecting the young actors.

The workshops and guidance of the adults involved help the actors become better people. Johnson notes the key things that the actors learn: commitment, discipline, compassion and respect

The focus of the Modjeska Youth Theatre Company is creating great performances for the community while building great community members. "Many [of Modjeska's actors] have gone on to receive scholarships and become professionals," Johnson says of previous youth group actors. "We're even happier if they become terrific citizens." ●

