

YouthWorks

A partnership with Mad River Theater
Works and the Ben El Child and
Family Center



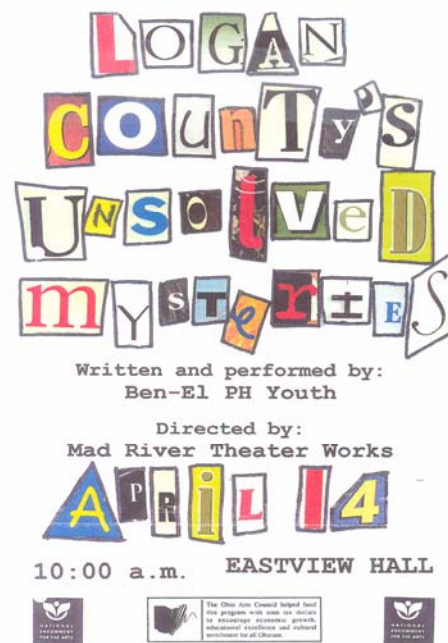
with the generous support of
The Martha Holden Jennings Foundation
Dayton Power and Light
Honda of America Manufacturing
The Della Selsor Trust



Overview

YouthWorks is a collaborative community-based arts project between Ben-El Child and Family Center and Mad River Theater Works that provides in-depth learning experiences in theater that build artistic abilities for children and youth from rural west central Ohio. *YouthWorks* brings together artists from Mad River with children and youth from the Ben El Child and Family Center to use the powerful tools of drama and storytelling to connect troubled kids with their roots, give voice to their feelings about the present, and help them discover a vision for the future. This year-round program consists of four 8-week modules. For the past seven years, the program has been located at one site in the small town of Bellefontaine, Ohio. In 2006-2007, the program is expanding to a second site in the nearby town of Urbana, Ohio. Each site includes workshops with 3 individual groups of 6-8 youth for 1 ½ hours per day for 4 days a week. The program is directed by 2 veteran Mad River artists with a combined 35 years of experience in working with kids in collaboration with other Mad River company members. It is monitored by an outside evaluator and also involves 4-5 Ben-El staff members in the play-building process. As in the past, each module begins with a week of assessment to establish artistic and developmental levels as well as consider the dynamics of each group. Each module ends with a week of evaluation to measure the extent to which the young people have grown toward their potential and learned new skills. Each 8-week module of direct contact between Mad River artists and youth includes:

- *Experience*: a performance by Mad River Theater Works or another nationally-recognized theater company followed by a question and answer session. These shows will focus on the rich cultural traditions of rural Ohio including both classics and plays drawn from traditional art forms like storytelling. Sometimes these performances are on-site and, at other times, the participants travel to nearby schools and performing arts centers.
- *Study*: (a) workshops to explore artistic expression and to learn basic theater skills, such as character development,



- improvisation, movement, and voice control; (b) sessions on how to explore stories from the past using local sources and interviews; (c) hands-on historical research around the themes of the experienced art work including field trips to museums and the cooperative creation of a timeline of changes in technology and historical events to place the work in context.
- *Performance*: (a) a decision by youth participants based on research to select a production subject that is compelling and has relevance to them related to the themes of the experienced work of art.; (b) interviews with outstanding traditional storytellers from the region about their memories and knowledge of the subject or theme; (c) sessions showing how to use the research and interview material to tell a story, how to structure a play, and how to improvise scenes; (d) improvisational rehearsals to create a play and/or work with selections from classical texts; (e) performance of the play for parents and family, other participants, and agency staff.
 - *Assessment*: (a) weekly meetings between artists and agency staff throughout the study and performance components to address current issues, tailor the program to fit the needs of individual groups, and to share assessments to review and track the program's progress; (b) pre- and post- testing to determine increases in knowledge and skills.



This format is used for each module of *YouthWorks* with new and different productions created by every group of kids. The play-creation process is most frequently orally-based. It begins with the improvisation of characters and situations based on research done by the group. Individual scenes are critiqued and the strongest material is shaped into a play. The scenes are refined and polished over several weeks. The end result is a performance that explores a theme presented by the experienced work of art. Participants increase their abilities to express ideas and work together toward a common goal. They learn how to create characters, improvise scenes and short plays, and how to present insights about their community through theater. The oral format allows kids that may have been hampered by traditional forms to express complex thoughts and feelings. The Ben

El staff is involved in all aspects of the play creation process and learns artistic skills along with the youth. *YouthWorks* provides participants with a greater awareness of their cultural heritage and makes connections between generations and with the community.

We were rehearsing the Mousetrap scene from Hamlet and my Ophelia was becoming more and more agitated. I paused and took Ophelia out into the hall, where we spoke about what was bothering her. She revealed that she had been in a very abusive relationship when she was younger and the scene brought all of those memories back. We spoke privately about using our emotions and experiences in a safe way and, when we reconvened a few minutes later, I asked to play Hamlet for a moment. I encouraged my young Ophelia to react however she would like to Hamlet's tirades. As the scene began, I could see this young girl start to take back some of the power she had lost so many years ago. She stood up to my Hamlet, and by the time the scene ended, it was a different girl sitting next to me. We resumed rehearsal with our normal Hamlet, and she performed beautifully. We often speak of the power of arts to heal, but in that moment I saw the transformation first hand.

Shalene Shimer, Teaching Artist

The Partners

The Ben-El Child and Family Center is a not-for-profit treatment center providing mental health services to children, youth and families from Logan and surrounding rural counties of west central Ohio. Our mission is to help children, youth and families deal with and overcome adjustment, behavior, emotional and/or psychological difficulties which stand in the way of healthful functioning. To do this, Ben-El is committed to finding ways of building and enhancing family support systems.

The Center is certified by the Ohio Department of Mental Health and provides out of school, day treatment to children and youth, ages 5-18, with mental illness symptoms or behavioral manifestation of such severity that there is significant interference with social and/or educational functioning. Ben-El offers a variety of services which including case management; crisis intervention, counseling, diagnostic assessment and a partial hospitalization program.

Mad River Theater Works, Ohio's only rural professional theater, has been a partner in the *YouthWorks* program since its inception. Mad River's mission is to create and produce plays that explore the concerns of rural people and to perform these works for multi-generational, primarily rural audiences. We interview local residents and research historical people and issues with contemporary relevance. We use this

material to create original plays with music. We perform our work for multi-generational audiences in small towns and farm communities throughout our region and beyond. Mad River Theater Works is committed to an ongoing process of exploration and documentation of the culture of our rural home, and to the interpretation of our discoveries through drama and music. Activities center around the presentation of original plays with music, reaching an audience of over 75,000 each year with more than 200 performances in diverse settings such as community centers, schools, and senior centers as well as theaters. We also conduct residencies in which we work with students, teachers, and community members to create and perform plays based on local history.



Since 1978, Mad River has created more than 30 original plays with music. Examples include *Captive Heart*, the story of Frances Slocum who was kidnapped by Indians on the frontier in 1785, which was created in collaboration with members of the Miami Nation of Indiana and descendents of

Slocum, and toured to small towns throughout Ohio and Indiana; *The Legend of Casey Jones*, about the legendary folk hero, which was created with the involvement of three local rural schools and also performed on tour, and *Freedom Bound*, a play with music based on the most famous incident in the history of the Underground Railroad in Ohio. Mad River has appeared at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, D.C. as well as performing arts centers from Maine to California and Florida to Alaska.

Project Goals

The Ben-El Child and Family Center and Mad River Theater Works believe that the arts are essential to the cognitive and social development of children and youth. We believe that all young people should know and appreciate the unique history and culture of their community. We believe that troubled kids, in particular, need to become more aware of the richness of their own backgrounds and their potential for

the future. Our goal is to involve young people in making theater that helps them see their lives and homes in new ways, gives them a voice, and opens up a dialogue with their families and community. The principal outcome we seek is to have participants demonstrate skills, knowledge, and understanding of the arts. Additional outcomes are:

- to identify, affirm and develop each child's artistic potential
- to provide access to the arts for underserved rural populations and directly engage participants in the artistic process of play building
- to foster artistic expression and communication through the arts and to use theater to build connections between artists, participants and community members.
- to provide opportunities for artists and staff to work towards best practice through assessment and opportunities for professional development in arts learning

Key Individuals

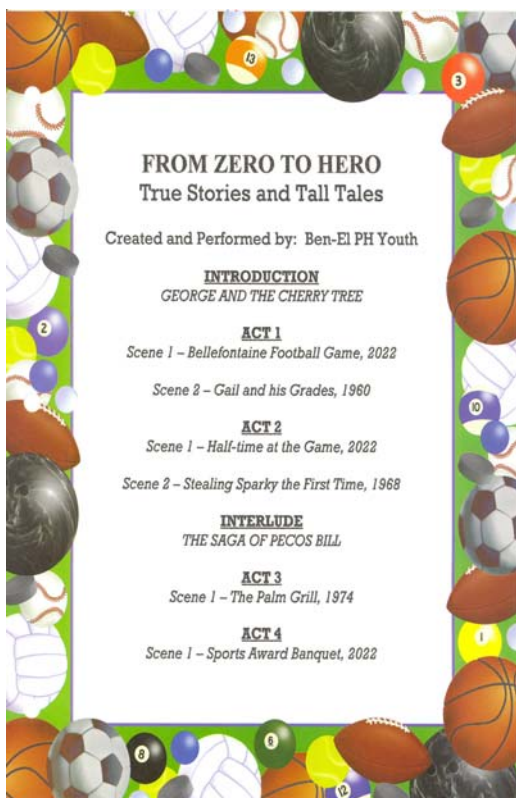
The key personnel who are responsible for the arts learning aspects of *YouthWorks* are all core company members of Mad River Theater Works. They include: Shalene Shimer, Teaching Artist, Jeff Hooper, playwright and Artistic Director of Mad River, and Bob Lucas, composer and actor. These artists work closely with Doug Steiner, Ben El Clinical Director and Lyvonne Goings, Partial Hospitalization Director as well as other staff member of Ben El.

The *YouthWorks* program was developed jointly by Ben El and Mad River Theater Works in 1999. Mad River is Ohio's only rural professional theater company and is based in the same community of West Liberty. Mad River has a 28-year history of creating plays for young audiences and touring throughout the United States. The artists of Mad River all have extensive experience working with children and youth in short and long-term residency situations. Mad River has been



a part of the Ohio Arts Council Artist in Residence Program since 1985 and has conducted 3-5 in-school residencies annually for more than 20 years.

Michele Winship, outside evaluator for *YouthWorks* is an Associate Professor of Education at Capital University and has expertise in research evaluation and methods for cognitive and social development of children and youth. She provides instruments and scoring methods to objectively measure the impact of the program.



Target Population

YouthWorks reaches children and youth, ages 5-18, who are patients at the Ben El Partial Hospitalization Center. All patients participate in the program and are referred to the center by health care professionals or juvenile courts. Patients are removed from their school or home and placed at the center for 6-8 hours per day. Typically, they have low self-esteem, learning disabilities, difficulties with self-control, and some have a history of dangerous behaviors. Many have experienced broken families and abusive childhoods, resulting in feelings of isolation from their peers, family and community. All of the young people reached through *YouthWorks* have had little or no access to arts experiences.

Plans for Promoting, Publicizing, and Disseminating

The identities of the children and youth are kept strictly confidential while at the Partial Hospitalization Center, therefore *YouthWorks* is not promoted using traditional methods. Performances are publicized through flyers to an audience of peers; Ben-El staff, parents, and families. Both Ben-El and Mad River are constantly looking for opportunities to share the work of this program and methodology with other arts learning and youth service agencies. Presentations have been made at several meetings and conferences including, Adriel School Training Workshops, *Youth in Arts Forum I and II*, and the *YouthReach Ohio* Conference, 2001, and *YouthWorks* was the top-ranked application to the Ohio Arts Council YouthReach Ohio Program in 2001-03 and 2003-05, and second in the Arts Partnership category in 2005-07.

