

# Children's Theater . . . . . and Bruce Marris

Bruce was my mask making teacher at Dell'Arte this past summer. With his theater groups he uses masks in training, but rarely in the production. In his words "Masks are very demanding on stage. They are liberating up to a certain level and then they are demanding." The picture at the right is Bruce with some of his students. It is his enthusiasm and energy that impressed me.

"With kids you have to have high stakes and for clowning the stakes have to be huge. Without huge stakes a small gesture has no meaning. It is getting the kids to realize that everything counts -- everything is seen. A sense of performance is that edge - a real game. I've had kids who've been with me for years and they ask 'What can I do to become a better actor?' I tell them 'Go play basketball' In basketball, the stakes are real and it is about doing things spontaneously.

"Theater is a great equalizer for kids. In a school theater group you have high achievers, low achievers, stoners, athletes, socialites, fringe, antisocial, geniuses, geeks . . . and then the rest -- everyone has the same type of struggle. The process in coming up with the play is transformational for the kids, but the product -- the play itself -- has to be transformational for the audience -- the adults.

"I remember well one student, Stewart. He was a real social pariah. He just found out he was gay and was struggling with that. It turns out that he was a song writer, and a really beautiful song writer.

"I had him playing a runaway teen who was spending the night on park bench. In the scene on an adjacent park bench were two winos who just met and were telling each other their stories in mime. As the winos became friends, Stewart was writing words down on a paper bag as though he was getting inspired. His job was to sing this song after the two bums left. The first time he did this I was off stage and watched as 20 of his peers stood in absolute stillness and reverence as he sang the song. You could hear a pin drop in the audience We'd been through rehearsals and did a number of performances, and it would happen every time. The kids would be running around back stage getting ready, but at the moment of his song, they all got still and listened. That was the most precious moment for those kids. It was also a great theater moment.



"Right now I have 15 kids in the workshop. Part of my work is to be a mirror for them. I give them a movement which they can't do, so they can come up to the job. I use a term 'Please your ancestors,' which means 'Do your movement with your own beauty.'

They buy into the intensity of the metaphor, so when I say 'Now that pleases your ancestors,' they understand that they are coming forward with their own authority and their own beauty. As a director what I want to see on stage are people with power and vitality. When people come to see children's theater - they think they will see charm and cuteness. I want to blast that away in the very first second and let the audience know that they are in for something. We want an authority that is so profound and mature that it's going to 'knock their socks off.'

"It takes two weeks to convince the kids they have permission to be loud -- to yell on the spot. 'I don't mean be louder, I mean yell.' This is a metaphor for children's theater. You're always guiding them back to where they are. They learn that standing before a group of people, they can take responsibility and that they do have power. When their community comes to see a play, they have that moment of power and authority. They have that right and they can do it. My job is really guiding them to that experience.

If you are kind hearted in your intention and you understand that loving the kids is an action and not a feeling, then you can get away with holding that high level of expectation. We all hang in there together to get that transformation in theater. They have to know I love them, then I can demand performance beyond everyone's expectations.

Bruce Marris has been working in children's theater since 1980 and has been teaching at Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre since 1985. He entered theater as a dancer, then went into mime, studying mime with Marcel Marceau and Etienne DeCroux in France. "I found I didn't want to be a straight actor, when I discovered Dell'Arte. There I saw the best show I'd ever seen. Physical theater is acting, dancing and mime all together. It is funny and piquant." Recently, Bruce spent eight months in the biggest creature shop in the history of film -- as the title character in "Godzilla." He was the creature motion specialist.