

STAGE

For more than fifteen years, summertime has brought a youth injection to Starkville Community Theatre through director M.J. Etua's annual children's workshop Project P.L.A.Y.

For several weeks in June every year, local students from 5 to 18 learn acting and design, staging their own shows from the ground up to be performed for their families, friends, and members of the community.

Lines of dialogue are memorized. Kids who've never stepped onstage before come slowly out of their shells and get the confidence to emote through movement and animal noises. Costumes and props are made from scratch, by inexperienced hands, with inexpensive materials from local stores.

Etua, who teaches theatre at Louisville High School and is the Secondary Division Chair for the Mississippi Theatre Association, said she loves figuring out how to utilize the talents of every student who joins the program, especially ones who start out shy or even disinterested.

"The joy that I have," she said, "is seeing students discover something about themselves, whether it's onstage or backstage or playwriting. I want to give every single child a chance to highlight their strength... kids who've never been onstage before, I will find what they can do."

Project P.L.A.Y. was Etua's brainchild for a community theatre that she saw didn't have programming aimed at youth, and she said it remains her biggest passion today.

As it has been since the program's inception, participation in Project P.L.A.Y is free, which Etua believes is important to reach students who may not have had the opportunity to experience theatre otherwise, particularly in sections of the community underserved by arts outreach.

Because Etua often writes her own scripts for the productions, she can tailor the script to the children she knows she has available, adding lines or characters based on turnout at auditions or how much the confidence level of a young performer grows during rehearsals.

The first Project P.L.A.Y. stemmed from Etua's family encouraging her to "write what you know, write what you love" - which for her meant translating pieces of her West African heritage into new works. Her first children's play was built on folk tales she'd heard from her parents, and the act of storytelling has been central to many of her scripts.

Etua said she never considered herself a writer but started penning her own scripts as a purely financial decision - it made more sense to create new work, free of royalties and copyright concerns, than to pay a publishing house for each short play the program was staging.

It also gave her the chance to take existing stories in new direction, like in this summer's *Tyia*, a West African spin on "Cinderella."

There's no pumpkin carriage in this version, and only one wicked stepsister. There's no fairy godmother, but there are some very helpful amphibians. Instead of a glass slipper, the heroine in this story leaves behind a sandal for her prince to find.

"What I want to show to the kids is that the Cinderella story, like every story, is universal," said Etua, who believes diversity is improving by inches in the arts but still has miles of ground to cover.

As a child, Etua said she didn't like classic Disney films very much because their intrinsic whiteness seemed to largely exclude people of different colors and backgrounds.

She sees her shows as a way to expand her students' understanding of a world beyond their own, with people who can look and act on the outside much differently than they do, while still teaching a universality of human experience.



Gabe Smith

"It doesn't matter what continent you're on," she said. "It doesn't matter what family you're a member of. You still have the same feelings."

Tyia is one of three short plays that will be performed during Project P.L.A.Y., and the only one written and directed by Etua.

Helping her with this year's program are Justine Moser, instructor at Columbus High School, and Jonathan Reeves, incoming theatre teacher at Cook Elementary.

Moser is directing a script she'd written in the past called *To Be Human*, which retells three African folk tales with modern messages about sacrifice and bullying. All the characters in Moser's plots are animals, like elephants, lions, snakes, and birds, but she says their lessons are aimed straight at young people.

Reeves is contributing *Africa Screams: Oh, Henry!!!*, a sequel to last summer's popular *Henry!*

Henry! was written by one of Etua's students in Louisville, Emaree Stone, and in five, dialogue-free minutes of slapstick and pantomime told the comedic tale of a janitor so bad at his job that he drives his shady boss mad and inadvertently causes the stock market crash of 1929.

The sequel will offer more of the same, this time in a jungle setting, said Reeves, who likes that his short play teaches kids basics of movement, emotion, trust, spacing, and timing.

To both Moser and Reeves, Project P.L.A.Y. fills a community need for teaching children to be more well-rounded people.

"Kids need something to do (in the summer)," said Moser, "they want to do something like this, and if it's provided in our community, I'm gonna help with it."

With modern cultural pressure to present ourselves in certain ways at certain times, adaptability in behavior and the ability to process emotion can be critical to a child's well-being, said Reeves.

"I can empathize with you if I can understand my own feelings and (yours)," he said. "I can learn to read facial expressions. I can be a better communicator and a better social interactionist."

For Etua, the program is an ongoing legacy of helping young people unlock their potential and solidify their evolving identities. One of her first participants from 1998 is now completing a Ph.D., she said, and it's the dedication of the children and their parents that's kept the program strong to this day.

"(This) is my heart," said Etua. "If I didn't do anything else, I would still do Project P.L.A.Y."

This year, Project P.L.A.Y. is sponsored by Hurdle Law Firm, Starkville Kiwanis Club, and Starkville Rotary Club.

Performances will be downtown at the Playhouse on Main Street on June 27, 28, 29 and 30 at 7 p.m., July 1 at 7 p.m., and July 2 at 2 p.m.. The program, containing three short plays, is likely to run around an hour.

Tickets will go on sale at the theater box office starting Monday, June 20 - all reservations will be general admission, meaning seating is first-come-first-served. Adult admission is \$7, with \$5 admission for children and students. For parents and interested community members, there will also be an all-show multipass that includes admission for every performance for only \$30.

For more information or to reserve seats, call [662.323.6855](tel:662.323.6855), or send an email to cao@sct-online.org.