

STAGE

In an academic environment often focused on athletics and standardized test scores, school theatre programs today have a reputation for drawing the short straw – on funding, on resources, and on participation – and for being a nice but inessential component of a student's education.

Albert Einstein disagreed. "Logic will get you from A to B," he's quoted as saying. "Imagination will take you everywhere."

On shoestring budgets, in stolen minutes between other extracurricular activities, local theatre educators are seeking to ignite their students' imaginations and prove that experience in the arts can be just as valuable to a child's development as basic arithmetic.

Some programs have dedicated theatre classes as part of the school curriculum. Some have to find time for rehearsals after-hours. For schools without an auditorium, that can mean scrounging for practice time in loaned venues like gyms, churches, and community centers.

Krista Vowell, finishing her sixth year at Starkville Academy as a History and Economics teacher, directs her school's shows without the benefit of theatre classes for her students or a permanent performance space for their productions.

"We rehearse in my classroom until show week, (and) we build traveling sets in our garage," she said. Other necessary set pieces and props are bought and borrowed at the last minute when the rented space becomes available. It's a whirlwind, said Vowell, but a rewarding one.

"All of those things seem to be insurmountable challenges, but when you have a group of kids who want to step out of the comfort zone and do this kind of thing, something different, and when you have the support of faculty, staff, and parents at school, and the community at large... those challenges seem to turn more into opportunities to shine."

Drama teacher Chelsea Petty has a program at Columbus Middle School with some of the vital resources Vowell lacks.

She's able to use her theatre classroom as a place where students create their own props and costumes for upcoming shows, and, over time, she's seen the progress in the quality of what they've been able to perform.

"Our sets have gone from rolled-up, spray-painted paper to an 18-foot pyramid in our most recent production of 'Aida'," said Petty. "When I tell (my students) the next big challenge we're going to tackle, they take a deep breath and dive in. They're always willing to do more and go further."

In addition to stagecraft, theatre teaches creativity, confidence, organization, and problem-solving. Michael Dendy, who's completing his second year as the Drama instructor at Starkville High School, sees theatre as an extension of his students' other coursework.

"It's another outlet for them," he said. "It's another way to challenge their brain and expand their skill set."

Justine Moser, finishing her second year teaching 10th Grade English at Columbus High and working with theatre students after school, believes theatre can make young people more empathetic and willing to work with others.



Gabe Smith

"It teaches them flexibility," she said. "I think it makes them better people... more accepting."

Vowell believes theatre helps ground her students by thrusting them into real-world, real-time interactions.

"Technology has sped up nearly every aspect of our lives," she said, "and in spite of all the positives that

brings, it has also helped us to communicate without actually seeing each other face to face. Our social skills and our interaction and empathy levels are waning....

Any time one can get a teenager to step out of his comfort zone, and speak, act, sing in front of crowds of people, then we have encouraged... a more connected society."

Moser said high school students spend much of their time finding a place where they feel comfortable to be themselves in the everyday academic setting.

When she took her students to the Mississippi Theatre Association annual festival in January, she said it was the first time many of them had seen that many like-minded young people together in one place.

"It was like they'd found their people," she said. "They thought, 'I'm not alone'."

Petty agreed that theatre creates a natural secondary support system for her students.

"It gives them (another) family and a place to belong," she said. "Differences are loved, and quirks are encouraged."

That welcoming spirit brought each of these local educators into lives in theatre, and, in some cases, it tapped into traits they possessed from an early age.

Sarah Stagers, who teaches Drama at Armstrong Middle, said, "I have been acting since I was four. I used to put on plays for my parents in our living room." From there, it was a natural jump to a role in an elementary school play.

Vowell also got involved in elementary school. For Petty, it was a church play at age 9.

For Dendy, campfire skits in the Boy Scouts brought him out of his shell enough to get him involved as a teenager. Moser had a high school teacher who awakened her to see drama as not only fun but as a possible path for her future.

At some point in all their lives, a theatre educator was there to spark their interest and encourage them to join the fold, and now they're inspiring a new generation to unlock their potential and push themselves into new places.

"I have seen the outcast become the leading man and a great singer," said Petty.

"(I've) seen the 'bad kid' carry beautifully an entire production... the quiet girl blossom into colorful characters... the class clown bring an audience to tears. I have seen the 'weird girl' dance with such conviction you couldn't take your eyes off of her."

Maybe Einstein was onto something.