

## **Late script, no problem for this theater group**

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BOISE - I've been to a Broadway musical just once – to see “Wicked” more than a decade ago – and it was everything I hoped it would be.

But for pure entertainment value, it's hard to beat the shortened performance of “Wicked” that I saw recently at the Treasure Valley Children's Theater in Boise. Especially considering what these theater campers went through.

Think about it. The kids showed up on a Monday, knowing that by the end of the week they would be performing an iconic Broadway smash hit. If that wasn't daunting enough, the kids didn't get a script until the day before their performance before family and friends.

Keep in mind, these scripts are not found in cereal boxes. It's practically a matter of finding a Broadway custodian that was lucky enough to sweep up a few script lines during an aisle cleanup. So, getting a script was a big accomplishment.

But the real work began after that. The campers spent hours on the day of performance rehearsing the lines, singing the musical numbers and doing everything else they were supposed to be doing. Did they pull it off?

Well, as the late Ed Sullivan used to say from the New York theater named after him, it was a “really big sheew.”

One of the more intriguing actors was Ace Kostelec, the oldest member of the cast who dressed the part of the Wicked Witch of the West. Ace, who has been part of the children's theater for several years, can do just about anything – from playing a wicked witch, to “Joe” in the “Bad Case of the Stripes.”

Life hasn't always been easy. Ace bounced around in several schools and has been the target of bullying, which led to anxiety and depression. But Ace found a place at the children's theater, where friendships become instant and lasting.

As Ace says, “When I'm performing on stage, the anxiety goes away.”

Ace will be a senior this year at Borah High School, with aspirations for going to college and continuing with theater education. From there, who knows. It could be performing with another theater group, appearing on a television series or ... maybe even Broadway one day. The Morrison Center would be a nice gig.

For Ace, and mom – Carrie Kostelec – the experience with the children's theater has been life-changing.

“Ace loves the theater, and it has been a place to really shine,” she says. “The theater is something to get excited about. Everybody is so pleasant, friendly and inclusive. The theater has absolutely helped Ace gain confidence.”

The stated purpose of the children's group is, “Changing the world, one theater kid at a time.” According to the director of the nonprofit group, Allison Terenzio-Moody, that's not a mere slogan or a rallying cry.

“Our way is to make connections through the theater, and we focus on those connections,” she says. “Kids may not fit in with sports and other activities, but they can find themselves here, where they are valued. We want to celebrate that.”

Moody, who has been with the theater since 2013 (starting as a performer) and executive director for two years, has seen child performers continue acting through college and beyond. She has seen countless others, such as Ace, come out of their shell and blossom.

“There are some who have struggled with mental health and parents don’t know what to do,” Moody says. But as Moody has seen many times, it all changes when (not if, but when) kids experience success on the stage. And that success can come on the final day of a theater camp.

“There’s a thrill when you’ve gone through rehearsals and put in many hours into creating a role. Then you have an audience that loves it,” Moody says. “We have so many kids finish, then ask when the next performance will be. They can hardly wait.”

The classes are not free, and as a nonprofit director, Moody is not shy about asking for donations. But she makes it clear that no child is turned away because of lack of affordability. Financial arrangements can easily be worked out.

From what I saw, the children’s theater is as worthwhile as any activity out there. If they gave Tony awards for theater groups that make the world a better place, my nomination (for what it’s worth) goes to the Treasure Valley Children’s Theater.

Envelope, please.

*Chuck Malloy, a long-time Idaho journalist and columnist, is a writer with the Idaho Nonprofit Center/Idaho Community Foundation. He may be reached at [ctmalloy@outlook.com](mailto:ctmalloy@outlook.com)*