

OUT OF THE NEST

Upstart Crow adds adults with planned production of Sweeney Todd

Upstart Crow Studios holds a noble vision: to provide a place where all kids, regardless of income, training or physical ability can perform. No child who feels the magic pull of the theater is turned away for any reason. Nurturing children in the arts has been a passion and a pledge.

Now, Upstart Crow is adding grown ups.

To learn a little more about these brave new plans for adult theater productions I threw out a few questions to executive director, original founder and Jane-of-all-trades Euralee Smith. Questions like: "Why?" Upstart Crow has done such great work with children over the past 12 years; why muck up the program with adults?

"That is how we began, with a focus on children. But just as parents begin to realize their children grow up, we have found so many of our kids that graduate from the program want more," Smith answers. With many former Crow kids in college theater programs, Smith notes they still haven't quite flown the coop, "They come back in the summer or during the year and ask to work or volunteer. [It's] their way of giving back to the program." To make room for these grown-up kids, Upstart Crow plans to add an adult theater season during the summer.

A hallmark of Upstart Crow is its approach to casting. According to the website, "The audition process is one of placement not of elimination. Everyone who auditions is cast." Of this Smith bravely confides, "If a play has 25 roles and we have 80 children wanting to join our merry band, then it is our job to think outside of the theater box and [do] whatever it takes to be sure those roles are there." Will the roles-for-all ethic apply to the adults who audition, too?

No.

"You get what you get, and you don't get upset," Smith quotes from *Pinkalicious*, remarking, "This is where life comes in. As adults this is a lesson we all learn and cope with." This is not to say that any adults not making the cast list will be kicked to the curb. "Our intent is to open doors by bringing more ownership to the adult program ... if you are not on stage, you can work backstage, costuming, set design, lighting, publicity, box office, orchestra. In other words, the world of theater has a place for everyone and, yes, we expect to fill those places with those who love the theater and understand there are no small roles."

It takes a village to raise a child and a small metropolitan area to run a successful theater. The hope is that adult actors will nurture the aspiring thespians. "So many times we see the experience of children in sports, theater, school as being temporary. We don't assume they will grow up to be professional athletes just because they play t-ball or grow up to be teachers because they went to school," Smith says. The adults working with Upstart Crow will show kids an example of people continuing on with a passion past school. According to Smith, "Adults offer inspiration, role models, mentorships to young people, helping them to recognize the power of creative expression all through life ... It is offering children and adults the experience of lending their voice to a common thread — our humanity."

First up for Upstart Crow's added adult program is a production of *Sweeney Todd*. This Stephen Sondheim musical features a murdering barber and some murderously tough music to sing. It's a far departure from the usual Crow fare of Seuss adaptations and updated versions of *Alice in Wonderland*. I had to ask Smith how they came to make that choice. "*Sweeney Todd* has long been a favorite for the company but, of course, it was too dark to do with children." (The lead character knocks off barbershop patrons and bakes them into pies.) But Smith notes, "There are many fabulous plays that we realize are not doable with a youth cast." When they began to consider expanding the program to include adults, they naturally jumped at the chance to do this long-forbidden show. With a number of passionate theater specialists behind the production, such as Jonathan Siegle, Timothy Wilcox and Laura Stowe, it marks the beginning of an exciting new era for Upstart Crow.

Smith is optimistic and energized by the challenge. She says, "It has been an exciting challenge and journey of discovery as we renovate the theater and look forward to bringing this level of professional theater to the Whiteaker 'hood' and to Eugene." — Anna Grace



SOME STUDENTS WILL PROGRESS TO THE ADULT THEATER PROGRAM (FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) KEVIN HAGEL, XANDER BERNSTEIN, TAYLOR DALTON IN *DR. HORRIBLE*

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