



## Setting the stage

### Theatrical kids get a chance to tread the boards

by Marija Djondric  
photographs by Brennan O'Connor

On a hot afternoon, a group of actors begins a spirited dress rehearsal of *Babes in Arms*, the 1937 Rodgers and Hart musical featuring American classics like "My Funny Valentine" and "The Lady is a Tramp." As the actors sing and dance to prepare for the big show later than night, it's hard to believe they are high school students at summer day camp.

Students with a "passion for the performing arts" and a keen interest in a more intensive program may look to CharActors Theatre Troupe, a 12-year-old company in Thornhill, Ontario. Megan and Wayne Davis, who both have musical theatre backgrounds, bought the company three years ago and offer what Megan calls a "serious program that involves hard work."

Students in Grades 7 to 12 with some theatre, dance and/or singing experience choose from two three-week musical theatre sessions and a two-week drama-only session. Campers learn about all aspects of theatre, including vocal training and dance, as well as workshops on audition techniques, character development and scene study. Students in the musical theatre sessions also attend the Stratford Festival. Each session ends with a musical or drama production that often surprises parents.

"It's amazing that they can do this kind of performance in such a short time," says Dennis Herbert, whose son Devin, 14, has been interested in performing since age six. "It is always astounding." He has proudly watched Devin progress from smaller roles to lead roles, blossoming as both a performer and a young man. Devin aspires to a career on Broadway and says at CharActors he can be himself with people who are "more accepting and fun-loving."

Megan Davis says campers get a chance to work with peers who share their love of the theatre. "This is a safe environment where they are not ostracized for making a choice to sing and dance and perform. They remain friends after the program. You can form strong bonds in a production environment."

Gary Oppenheimer's daughter Jenny, 16, has been involved in theatre programs for eight years. He sees a huge difference in how she interacts with her "regular" school friends and her theatre friends. While the former engage in more conventional teenage activity, the latter share a passion that includes hours of discussion, poring over Broadway videos and rehearsing. And although Jenny isn't interested in a theatre career, Oppenheimer says her time with the group is "almost like a job. She has committed hours to practicing," and earned a starring role in CharActors' production of *Babes in Arms*.

While they may not have been referring to summer day camp, Rodgers and Hart understood the appeal of the theatre: "We bring drama to your great metropolis," they wrote in 1925. "We are the little theatre group. Each of us has built a small acropolis, to hold our little theatre troupe. We'd be very glad to meet you, and greet you, and seat you and treat you just great."



Summer theatre camp offers a chance for confidence-building and fun. Grace Burgess, 14, studies up for her role in *Babes in Arms*, performed by the CharActors Theatre Troupe summer musical theatre group in Thornhill, Ontario.



For Brittany Dale, 14, and Jenny Oppenheimer, 16, rehearsals are always a laugh at the CharActors program.