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## **Act Well Your Part**

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# Act Well Your Part

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Matt Loehrke '02 is the tour marketing associate at the Missoula Children's Theatre, which has toured for more than 40 years, visiting some 1,200 communities serving over 65,000 children annually.)

The iconic red Missoula Children's Theatre (MCT) truck pulls up, and we load suitcases along with 13 parcels containing the set, props and costumes for 60 children to perform an original musical adaptation of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Typically the MCT truck arrives on location Sunday night, two tour actors/directors audition, cast and rehearse for a week, culminating with a performance on Saturday. Then we pack up, drive to the next town and do it again. This day we are not off to California or Connecticut. We are headed to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, to work with the children in the Carol Morgan School and present a show in a week. However, for all of these children, English is not their primary language.

My journey to Santo Domingo began a dozen years before, when, as a Linfield student, I searched for my niche. I enjoyed acting, but wasn't sure I wanted that as a career. I enjoyed scenic design, but didn't feel a passion for it. Then, I served as a class assistant for Introduction to Acting and a spark was ignited. As I watched students grow and grasp that "aha" moment of acting, I knew I wanted to pursue a career in educational theatre.

At the Carol Morgan School, roughly 150 pairs of eyes are staring at me. It is audition time and the humid gym is abuzz with the excitement and apprehension of an audition. The children, grades one through five, sit patiently as we present our expectations. For most, this is their first audition. Our goal is twofold: cast the show, but more importantly, make sure that each child has a good time. Most of them will not receive a role and that is the worst part of our job, but the nature of theatre.

At the end of auditions we announce the cast list. The children are patient as my American English does gross injustice to their Spanish names. The last roles we announce are those of The Evil Queen and Snow White and the two girls receive cheers and applause. However, the finality of announcing the last roles

brings rejection and tears. The school staff explains to students how to handle disappointment while asking them to support their friends who were cast. We see the power of educational theatre as students begin to congratulate and console one another. Sixty students are no longer just classmates, they are a cast.

The first few rehearsals of *Snow White* go well. The songs, choreography and character work come easily. We were prepared for challenges with the language but are surprised to encounter none, only the random vocabulary clarifications such as "What is a kumquat?" or "Why do I call this person a meathead?" Soon, however, we see the excitement turn to apprehension. The performance is now just two days away, lines have yet to be memorized and self-doubt is evident. We smile, encourage them and continue rehearsals. The cast is having fun and the show is coming together; still, an air of nervousness prevails.

"But Matt! I can't do it!" The girl playing The Evil Queen is performing in less than 24 hours and is struggling with her role. Her success is my responsibility. As a theatre educator, my most important job is to create success at any level for any student. No matter if a child has one line or hundreds, four solos or a brief moment in a chorus reprise, their success is what matters. I smile. My decade of training from Linfield, Seattle Repertory Theatre and MCT kicks in. "I know you can. Now let's talk about how you can."

There's an old saying in theatre, a bad dress rehearsal makes for a good performance. As we finish our dress rehearsal it is clear we are on track for an amazing performance. While we assure the young cast that the show will be fine, we are worried. Backstage is too small, lines are dropped, the accompanist can't hear cues, the recorded sound didn't work. Our stress begins to rise until The Evil Queen timidly asks, "Did I do alright?" The stress dissolves and I reply, "You were great. We are going to have awesome shows."

Backstage I'm dressed and waiting to perform with 60 children who make up the cast. It is 85 degrees with 90 percent humidity. The



Matt Loehrke '02 featured in a Missoula Children's Theatre production of Hansel and Gretel. Loehrke is the tour marketing associate at MCT and serves as director and actor for productions around the country. (©2013 Maureen Roy Photography)

*“My journey began in Linfield’s Pioneer Hall, an endearing black box theatre that seated about 60. I had friends and faculty who encouraged and supported me. Through classes, lessons, performances, late nights and long talks I grew from a timid freshman to a confident theatre professional.”*

air conditioners have to be turned off or no one will hear anything from the stage. This “gym-atorium” is far from ideal, but I’m reminded of Pioneer Hall Theatre and all the quirks and challenges we overcame in the small space. I look at the Dwarfs to gauge their anxiety. To my surprise I see they are excited and eager, encouraging and jovial, proud and focused. They are ready to succeed together.

The cast strikes their finale pose and parents give a standing ovation. What a child can do through theatre education is amazing. I see The Evil Queen’s family waving to her, beaming with pride. It doesn’t matter what language you speak, you can easily read her face. It says success.

My journey began in Linfield’s Pioneer Hall, an endearing black box theatre that seated about 60. I had friends and faculty

who encouraged and supported me. Through classes, lessons, performances, late nights and long talks I grew from a timid freshman to a confident theatre professional. My journey has taken me to the Seattle Repertory Theatre, where I spent a year as their educational intern, and grew into a theatre teaching artist.

Those combined experiences led me to MCT. I have witnessed the look of accomplishment on a child’s face when they take a bow for the very first time and the joy of a parent thanking you for giving their child this performing arts experience. You can’t teach that from a book or through a test – theatre education gives students a human experience that cannot be quantified.

– Matt Loehrke '02