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Theatre 31 Goes *Zoom!*

By Annemarie Donkin

Adapting live theatre to the Zoom world is a challenge for any company, yet with a group of actors between the ages of 7-14, Theatre 31 has accomplished the feat with style and panache!

"I am not throwing away my shot!" What can you do when a worldwide pandemic hits and no one can gather together in the dark to experience the magic of a play, especially when your mission is to provide a theatrical summer camp and education for student performers?

The answer is: Adapt, because the show must go on!

For Chad Scheppner, a Shakespearean-trained actor, founder and artistic director of Theatre 31, this is exactly what his theatrical summer camps and school programs strive to accomplish.

The hit song, "My Shot," from *Hamilton*, performed by his students and streaming on the Theatre31 website this summer (theatre31.com) is the perfect example of this adaptation. This is due to the dedication of Scheppner and his multi-talented staff members with experience ranging from Broadway to *Cirque Du Soleil*.

"Theatre 31 is fortunate to enjoy professional relationships with many accomplished artists who are passionate about the arts and about sharing their wealth of knowledge and experience with our students" Scheppner wrote.

The Mission Statement for Theatre 31 is "to provide fun, non-competitive, all-inclusive theatre arts classes

and camps that give students an opportunity to strengthen their abilities to perform and collaborate, enhance their skills of interpersonal awareness, and build self-confidence."

As anyone can see from the music videos found on the Theatre 31 website, these students are dedicated, disciplined, and motivated to perform to the best of their abilities regardless of the quarantine. The main benefits of performing arts for young people include improving life skills and academic performance, so despite COVID-19, Theatre 31 was determined to conduct its summer classes...remotely. They will also continue with a full curriculum of remote classes in the fall.

THEATRE 31 SUMMER CAMP

Scheppner recalled how his summer camps were conducted prior to COVID-19.

"Some programs ran up to 25 students, some had more than 100 students involved as actors and technicians producing a weekend of performances," he wrote. "The summer programs had about 40 students per session and ended in a single presentation."

Essentially, Scheppner feels his classes play an essential part in elementary and middle school education.

"There are several different theatres and schools that we work with on the Westside, from Malibu to Santa Monica and the Venice area," Scheppner said. "We run after-school programs as well as programs that are held during the school day at public and private elementary and middle schools. We also rent out theater spaces like the Electric Lodge and Beyond Baroque in Venice, and the Lincoln Middle School Auditorium in Santa Monica, which has a capacity of about 600 seats."

Scheppner said they are fortunate to have many funding streams, depending on the school.

"With some programs, we are funded by the parents of our students. In others, we receive grants from PTSA's, and organizations such as the Santa Monica Education Foundation, which is a great reason why we are involved in the schools in Santa Monica," Scheppner said. "Some funding also comes directly from the schools, on a case-by-case basis."

THEATRE 31 IN THE TIME OF ZOOM

The Canyon Chronicle asked Scheppner if Zoom limits or expands teaching options and if it can sign up many more kids than might otherwise be able to participate?

"It allows us to reach out beyond the Los Angeles area, which is really cool," Scheppner wrote back. "We've had students over the summer from all over California and even participating from different states. However, because distance learning has such a negative connotation in most people's households, our camps have a third of their usual enrollment. I'm hoping, however, that as we move forward and more people see what we are able to do in this format and our intentions with distance learning, that parents and students will be excited to add this to their learning schedules."

Regarding their first music video of the summer, "My Shot" from *Hamilton*, Scheppner wrote, "For some, it was their very first theatrical experience, and I was very pleased with what they were able to collaborate to create." On the video, one can also see that he also joined in on the fun.

Theatre 31 will soon be posting their second music video of the summer, a rock version of "I Won't Grow Up" from *Peter Pan* (in collaboration with Greg Hilfman, accomplished Topanga musician and producer), and will end its final distance-learning summer camp of the year with "Mean Girls," a musical with a strong message of standing up for what is right regardless of how others may judge you.

"In this camp we will collaborate to create a video recording of 'I See Stars' and much more," Scheppner said. "With this camp, we're beginning a new and exciting program called 'Speak Up' that will be offered to schools in the Fall, along with our already existing performing arts curriculum."

For more information and to register for Fall: theatre31.com.



"Dick Van Dyke came to the show and did a workshop with the students at the end of the 2016 performance of *Mary Poppins* while the audience watched," Chad Scheppner wrote. "At the end, we all sang 'Let's Go Fly a Kite' together; it was a really a magical moment with tears of joy coming from many of the kids who had no idea he was coming!"



From *Once On This Island*, Lincoln Middle School, 2018. Photo courtesy of studiosigal.com



All photos were taken pre-pandemic at the Lincoln Theatre production of *Mary Poppins* in 2016. Photos courtesy of Theatre 31



Above: Chad Scheppner, Founder and Artistic Director of Theatre 31. Photo courtesy of Chad Scheppner

Left: Dick Van Dyke visited with actors and the audience from the Lincoln Theatre production of *Mary Poppins* that Chad Scheppner directed in 2016 at the Lincoln Auditorium.

AN ACTOR PREPARES

Chad Scheppner was born in Fresno, California and had his first acting experience in elementary school.

"My family migrated to the Central Valley from Oklahoma during the Dustbowl Era—real life *Grapes of Wrath* style—and my mom's mother's side immigrated from the Azore Islands in Portugal. My first experience with theatre was with the winter programs that our elementary school did each year." He laughed as he recalled "being a duck one year for a play about Thanksgiving. I really liked it and recall how seriously I took the role," he said, laughing again. Yet, acting didn't occur to him until he met a certain teacher in high school.

"I didn't do anything theatrical after elementary school until my senior year of high school when I decided to try out for a Shakespeare play because my friends in English class thought I read *Hamlet* well when we were studying the play in class. I enjoyed performing in that play but thought that it would be the end of acting for me until auditions for the musical came," Scheppner wrote. "I wasn't going to audition until my high school drama teacher, Robert Bullwinkle, a man of giant stature at 6 feet, 7 inches, told me that if I didn't audition for this play it would be the worst mistake I made in my entire life. I auditioned and ended up getting the lead. It was one of those 'magical experiences' on the stage that left me wanting more. I then went on to pursue Theatre Arts in college."

After college Scheppner performed roles at many Regional Theatres across the country, including Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Valentine in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at the Idaho Shakespeare Festival; Edmund in *King Lear* and Orlando in *As You Like It* at the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival in Kansas City, MO; and the Lover/Hawker in *The Who's Tommy* at the Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts.

THEATRE 31 AND WILL GEER'S THEATRICUM BOTANICUM

Scheppner lives in Topanga with his wife, Megan Geer-Alsop, an acclaimed stained-glass artist, who, with Willow Geer-Alsop, is one of the daughters of Ellen Geer and Peter Alsop. Chad and Megan have two children; their daughter graduated from Topanga Elementary Charter School this year, where their son will start third grade in the fall.

Asked how, as a young actor, he discovered the Theatricum, he told a fun story.

"I was making my way back to California after having been a part of several Shakespeare Festivals and Regional Theatres," Scheppner wrote. "A dear friend I met at the Idaho Shakespeare Festival, David Anthony Smith, told me about Ellen Geer and the Theatricum. He had played several roles, including *Hamlet* at the Theatricum, and told me about the amazing work that was happening there. I auditioned and was cast as Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* (alongside Alan Blumenfeld as Shylock) and

Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*."

It was the meeting with Megan that created a real connection with him at the Theatricum.

"The first time that I saw Megan was in 2002 at her mother's house for the first read-through of *The Merchant of Venice*. I remember seeing her wander in and out of the kitchen during our read-through and I was immediately struck by her beauty," he wrote. "It wasn't until a few years later, after we both ended long-standing relationships, that we connected and I, of course, learned to love her for much more than just her looks!"

He's been a company member at the Theatricum for years now, playing many roles including Richard III in *Richard III*; Valere in *The Miser*; Dracula in *Dracula*, and the role of Caesar in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

"I also was part of their educational programs, where we would tour shows to schools and played several other roles including Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* and Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, Scheppner wrote.

THEATRE 31

Scheppner founded Theatre 31 in 2005.

"Theatre 31 began about 15 years ago, when I turned 31-years-old," he said. "The company name came from my age at the time, but also from some friends of mine, who called me Chad 31 or just 31 when we were younger. I had an affinity for that number and some of its meanings in numerology. I was going through big transitions in my life at the time, and the name made sense to me. This was the point when I stepped out on my own, focusing on my own educational theater company."

We asked Scheppner what drove him from acting to teaching theatre.

"I came to a point in my career where I felt more inspired by teaching, directing and writing instead of being on the stage," he wrote, "I had been working as an instructor and an actor in tandem for years, and absolutely love the creative process of both, but started to find that I was enjoying my work as an instructor more. I really loved seeing what kind of direct effect the classes were having on young people and it felt more important to me. I also found that the transition to focusing on theater education allowed me more time to be with my family."

He didn't do this all on his own and credits his fellow theatre instructors.

"I do feel lucky, and couldn't create this company without a lot of people I've met over the years who inspire me as an artist and have a dedication to inspiring and sharing their experience and expertise with our young students," he said. "Theater education is especially important right now because there is a real depression that I am seeing in young people as they deal with this pandemic. I think that theatre education is a great way for them to get to express themselves and what they are experiencing during this difficult time. In many ways, I see what we do as Art Therapy." ■

Theatre 31 Zooms Online in the Fall

Mean Girls, a musical with a strong message of standing up for what is right, will end the distance-learning summer camp and a collaborative video recording of "I See Stars." a new and exciting program, "Speak Up" will also be offered to schools in the Fall, along with the theater's existing performing arts curriculum.

Zoom Meetings. Students meet with the instruction team each morning at 10 a.m. for one hour, with instruction in theater and improvisation games, script/scene work/acting/dancing and singing

Tutorial Videos. At least one hour of instruction is available per day in dance, choreography and singing. Self-taping (recording from home), acting for the camera, costuming your character and more. Students may access a private folder with videos posted on YouTube.

Culmination. Students will be assigned roles in at least one scene and/or song from the musical we are studying and will be asked to learn their parts from home. They will be asked to record themselves performing their parts and send in their recordings. Theatre 31 will edit the recordings together and create a "Showcase" video that will be made available to all families involved.

Requirements

- Access to the Internet with a reliable connection that will allow students to be part of our Zoom classes.
- Earphones, earbuds, or headphones and a device on which students can listen to music (computer, iPod, telephone, etc.)
- Access to YouTube and a place where they can practice their dances.
- Students will need to download the music tracks that will be sent to them via Dropbox.
- Access to a video recording device (separate from the one mentioned above). A phone with a video camera will work great.
- Parents may need to help our younger campers with their home recordings.

For more information and to register: theatre31.com.