

# Where to turn when your child is serious about drama



Noble Fool Theatricals Performing Arts Academy offers everything from musical theater to acting to a Glee-themed show choir class and, new this year, a master's improv class.

By Samantha Nelson

Whether your child is a born performer who can't wait to share his or her talents with the world or is still looking for an extracurricular activity to be passionate about, local theater programs can provide the perfect creative outlet. Area theaters offer a variety of classes to help kids of all ages and experience levels build confidence, make new friends and learn how to be little stars.

**Noble Fool Theatricals Performing Arts Academy at Pheasant Run Resort, 4051 E. Main St., St. Charles, (630) 364-0550; noblefool.org/education. Price: \$155 to \$185.**

Most children start their training at Noble Fool Theatricals Performing Art Academy in their musical theater classes. Groups are broken down by ages. This fall tots ages 3 to 5 will be working on "Beauty and the Beast" from 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. Sundays, Sept. 19 through Oct. 24. Kids ages 6 to 8 will practice "High School Musical 2" from 5:30 to 7:30 Wednesdays, Sept. 15 to Oct. 20. Kids 9 to 12 will learn "Chicago" from 9 to 11 a.m. Saturdays, Sept. 18 through Oct. 23. Students get exposure to singing, dancing and choreography as they memorize lines and songs to perform selected scenes



**All experience levels are taught at Noble Fool drama classes.**

in a short final showcase for friends and family. Even though everyone gets a part, kids have to audition so they'll learn how the process works if they have to try out at school or another theater.

Education manager Tracy Whiteside said the classes

always bring in a mix of first-time students and kids who have taken other theater classes. They work to make sure it's still a challenge for experienced students, who can also branch off and take more specialized classes like improv comedy. Improv students start out with basic games, which help break the ice, and then move on to develop scenes, style and comedic timing. For the first time this year, the academy is also offering an advanced improv class and they also plan on starting an audition-only master's class in January for really serious students. One new addition is a Glee-themed show choir class, which teaches kids proper breathing techniques, pitch and how to read sheet music, mixed with a little dance movement as they perform popular songs in solo, duet and ensemble format. Whiteside said she's seen an increased interest in all of the classes as kids have fewer creative outlets at their schools.

"The first thing they cut is performing arts," she said. "It actually helps kids perform better in school when they explore their creative side."

**Steel Beam Theatre, 111 W. Main St., St. Charles, (630) 587-8521; steelbeamtheatre.com. Price: \$100.**

A professional theater instructor teaches an hour-long, six-week fairy tale theater class for kids ages 6 to 8 on Wednesdays and ages 9 to 11 on Thursdays starting Sept. 15 and 16, respectively. This season's story is "The Tortoise and the Hare." Students work to bring the characters to life by practicing movement, voice and stage presence. Kids do a lot of exploration of character, trying to figure out how to walk and talk the way they would and using basic theater games that encourage imagination. The class has proved very popular, with some kids taking it all year and just moving from story to story. Still it's easy for beginners to get into.

"No one needs to fear not having enough experience," said founder Donna Steel.

Older performers ages 11 to 14 join their comedy improvisation class where they learn improv games to help them think on their feet. Students who already have the theater basics down can take Scene That, a workshop that focuses on performing short scenes and further developing memorization and character

building skills. All classes end with an informal showcase where students can demonstrate what they've learned. But the true test of serious acting school students is to audition for shows at Steel Beam. The theater runs a rigorous full season of seven professionally directed productions, casting kids ages 9 to 16 to perform for other kids in the small venue.

**Children's Theatre of Western Springs, 4384 Hampton Ave., Western Springs, (708) 246-4043; theatrewesternsprings.com. Price: \$365 to \$425.**

One of the more intensive programs around, classes at Children's Theatre of Western Springs begin Sept. 13 and meet once a week for the full school year. The creative drama class for first-graders meets for only 45 minutes, but most classes are an hour, with high school classes and some specialized courses like mask making going for two hours. The youngest students in first-through third-grades start off with an introduction to acting, playing theater games and performing stories with an emphasis on improving focus, self-esteem and empathy. Fourth- and fifth-graders start having more options. One semester is a traditional theater class with scripts and acting lessons where they'll develop and understanding of different forms of storytelling and work on their ability to cooperate with others and provide constructive criticism. The second semester is spent in a specialty. These can include improving your speaking voice, movement, singing or dancing. Middle school students have even more options. They can learn how to act and audition on camera, work on solos and large group pieces in a musical theater class and get a new appreciation for Shakespeare by performing his works. Classes can be a mix of newcomers to the program and students who are taking acting for the first time, so teachers work to identify their abilities and provide different challenge levels.

"The goal is for the child, as they move through the program, to establish a good foundation so they feel confident to try something new," said Leslie Price, children's theater director.

The classes culminate in a pair of open houses, one in December and one in May. Not a true production,

the informal performances let students show what they've learned which can be songs and activities for younger kids.

**Moving Image at St. Paul's United Church of Christ,** 5739 Dunham Road, Downers Grove, (630) 234-1392; newworldrep.org. Price: \$120 to \$270.

Formerly New World Repertory, the recently renamed Moving Image offers a series of 10-week sessions, making it easy for kids who also want to do other extracurricular activities or haven't tried theater before.

"Sometimes it works out for parents so they can put the child in to see if they like it and then sign up for the next one rather than committing for the whole year," said artistic director Alison Henderson.

Classes meet weekly on Saturdays from Sept. 11 to Nov. 20. Students ages 4 to 6 take 45-minute sessions that are focused on creative play, storytelling and improvisation, rather than producing any finished product. Kids 7 to 13 join a basic acting class where they work on getting into character. Instructors try to steer kids away from playing the characters they know from movies or TV that they might play pretend at home, encouraging them to create unique characters. Classes use a lot of movement-based training rather than scripted actions and words.

"We usually come up with physical life of the character before we add any lines," Henderson said.

Classes are small, maxed at 10 to 15 students, which appeals to children who thrive with individual attention. Classes were originally divided up by skill levels, but now they mix up first time students and those with more acting experience and just have higher



Metropolis School of the Performing Arts, which last year produced "The Little Rascals," above, starts classes this week.

expectations of the veterans, who often provide examples to younger kids. Henderson said seeing other children eager to participate can help dispel the nervousness and reluctance to join in she sees in entirely beginner groups.

"We almost have a mentorship quality to our classes where the older kids, who have been acting with us for a year or so, can lead a warm-up for me from time to time," she said. "It's really worked out well for us."

Kids ages 10 and up can also participate in a musical theater class, learning a mix of singing, dancing and acting and how to have their characters transition from speaking lines to musically expressing them. All classes culminate with a showcase for family on the last day.

**Metropolis School of the Performing Arts,** 111 W. Campbell St., Arlington Heights, (847) 577-5982, ext. 221; metropolisarts.com. Price: \$240-\$340.

Acting classes at Metropolis meet once a week through Jan. 22, culminating in a performance showcase. Sessions began Sept. 7, but late additions are accepted until Sept. 20. Professional instructors tailor lessons to all skill levels. New students start by taking acting process, where they will learn games, exercises, acting theories and vocal and physical techniques to improve their acting and communication in general. Once kids have taken the intro class, they can join acting performance where they work on script and generate original work for a final performance. Kids who also love to sing and dance can start with musical theater process, working as an ensemble and building self-confidence while learning to read sheet music and trying different music styles and choreography. The follow-up musical theater performance class integrates scripts and songs. Serious performers who have already taken two acting classes can join the theatre studio program with a teacher recommendation, where they'll learn advanced character study, movement, scene study and voice skills. Classes are divided by age with groups from kindergarten through second grade, grades 3-5, middle school students and high school students.



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