

# Drama by George

## Arts Programming Overview + Teaching Artist(s) Bio

We provide live professional performances, after-school drama clubs, summer camps, and classroom workshops for students in grades PreK-12. We primarily serve elementary-age children, but frequently also work with younger and older students.

### LIVE PROFESSIONAL PERFORMANCES

Our performances are school assemblies performed by professional actors which address SEL topics like bullying prevention, achievement, and resilience. Our most popular performances include *BB WOLFE GETS SCHOOLED*, a touring play about bullying, empathy, and a Big, Bad Wolf; *THE GRIT GAME SHOW*, a live interactive game show that motivates students for resilience and achievement; and *STORIES ALIVE*, an audience-participation storytelling program that incorporates performing arts and bullying prevention content. We present most of our performances in schools during the academic year but also serve other organizations, primarily during the summer months. Since our inception, we've successfully presented more than 730 performances for approximately 80,000 students.

### AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS AND SUMMER CAMPS

We offer three main programs for out of school time, each of which typically takes place during 8 weekly after-school sessions. *CENTER STAGE* equips students in grades 3-8 to rehearse and perform a short, fully-staged play. *DRAMA FUN* empowers younger actors in grades K-2 to rehearse and perform a play in pantomime (acting without words). *SPOTLIGHT* uses hands-on games and activities to teach students in grades K-5 basic theatre skills. We've successfully presented more than 160 drama clubs.

### CLASSROOM PROGRAMS

Our workshops and artist residencies include both programs that help participants build theatre skills (like developing a character or improvisation), and programs that help participants develop SEL-related skills (like practicing empathy or conflict resolution through role playing). We've successfully presented more than 325 classroom workshops.

## Teaching Artist(s) Bios(s)

**GEORGE HALITZKA, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR** - George (he/ him) is a theatre educator, director, and writer — but first and foremost, he's a storyteller. George has performed for 80,000 students in the Louisville area and beyond, often presenting content that he's written and developed himself. He's also taught drama workshops to thousands of students of all ages; favorite topics include comedy improv and playwriting. George's plays have been published by Playscripts, Inc. and Christian Publishers. His works have been

performed an estimated 900 times by organizations around the world, from Canada to China. George loves good stories, his wife Julie, and Chicago deep-dish pizza (not necessarily in that order).

**CRISTINA DELVESCOVO, TEACHING ARTIST** - Cristina (she/ her) has been an instructor, choreographer, stage manager, and costume designer in Louisville since 2021. She received her Bachelor's degree in Family and Child Sciences from Florida State University and has been involved in a number of youth shows including *Big Bad*, *Hoka Poka*, *Annie*, *It's Possible*, *Amazing Grace*, and most recently *The Outsiders* at Grace James Academy of Excellence. She has a passion for musical theater and empowering young people to use the arts as a way to express themselves. When she is not working within the arts, Cristina loves gardening, spending time with her family and dogs, and playing video games! She is beyond excited to be working with Drama by George as a teaching artist this year, continuing to impact local youth in a positive light and bring a love of the arts to a younger generation.

**SHELBY DURBIN, TEACHING ARTIST** - Shelby (she/her) is a reader, writer, and actor born and raised in Louisville, Kentucky. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology (with minors in both Women and Gender Studies and English) from Bellarmine University. Following graduation, she moved to the Philippines with the Peace Corps, where she collaborated with local colleagues on youth development programming. One of her earliest acting roles was Dorothy in a youth production of *The Wizard of Oz*, and thus began a lifelong love of theatre! When she's not emoting on the page or stage, Shelby enjoys traveling, hiking, and in general, being a silly goose.

**JULIE HALITZKA, TEACHING ARTIST AND WEBMASTER** - Julie (she/ her) is a gifted artist and educator who's passionate about kids, the arts, and technology. She holds an M.Div. in Worship from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, an M.S. from Walden University in Early Childhood Studies, and a B.S.S. from Cornell College. In her "day job," Julie is the Jefferson Training Coach with Child Care Aware of Kentucky. She also serves as a worship leader at St. John United Methodist Church.

**KATIE JOACHIM, TEACHING ARTIST** - Katie (she/ her) is an actor, costume designer, and theatre educator. Favorite roles as a performer include Maria in *The Sound of Music* (Bay View Music Festival) and The Baker's Wife in *Into the Woods* (Hope College Theatre Department). Offstage, she's worked as the director of Bay View Youth Theatre in Michigan, as an artist educator with Kentucky Shakespeare, and as a dresser with Kentucky Opera. She graduated from Hope College in 2020 with a BA in Theatre and Creative Writing. In her spare time, Katie enjoys knitting, travel, and hiking in the beautiful state of Kentucky. She's excited to help her students grow to love the arts!

## **Artistic Content of Programming**

Our artistic content is different for each program. Here, we'll describe BB WOLFE GETS SCHOOLED, which is currently our "flagship" professional touring performance (the primary one that we're marketing and booking in fall 2023).

Fifth grader B.B. Wolfe is the biggest bully at Fairy Tale Academy. That's why the principal, Ms. Fahree, decides to use her magical powers to transform B.B. into the kids he's been picking on! As B.B. walks a mile in his classmates' shoes, he learns how they've been hurt by his actions. He discovers that Rapunzel was confident in her abilities as a student — until B.B. and his friends made fun of her grades. Hansel, whom B.B. has been mocked for wearing unstylish clothes, struggles financially because his mom is chronically ill. As for Little Red Riding Hood, who gets teased for living with Granny, her parents can't care for their daughter themselves. As he grows to understand his classmates, B.B. Wolfe commits to turning his bullying behavior around. He begins treating others with kindness!

*B.B. Wolfe* is stylistically unique in that it uses only one live performer (an actor portraying B.B. Wolfe), but incorporates more than a dozen other actors, who represent diverse races and genders, via video recordings which are displayed on two large projection screens. Much of the play consists of B.B. interacting with actors on screen. Together with our use of audience involvement and student volunteers brought onstage, the media-rich nature of the performance helps keep student audiences engaged.

We evaluate our professional performances primarily through teacher surveys. In the case of *B.B. Wolfe*, 92% of educators have found the script to be well-written, and the same 92% would recommend it to other teachers based on performance quality.

## **Educational Content of Programming**

Our educational content is different for each program. Here, we'll describe CENTER STAGE DRAMA CLUBS, which are our most popular out of school time offering.

In eight weekly after-school sessions, we allow students to explore the basics of theatre while they rehearse a fully-staged short play. We teach a few concepts didactically (don't turn your back on the audience, the difference between downstage and upstage, etc.). But most learning happens through hands-on rehearsal. We believe that the most effective way to teach both theatre and the associated life skills are in a real-world setting; that is, rehearsing a short scripted play

We use proprietary play scripts for our drama clubs. That means we can adapt them to have a meaningful speaking role for every student enrolled in the program. (We never cast someone as "Second Tree from the Left.")

In addition to growing as young actors, we help our students develop the life skills that are inherent in the performing arts. These include creativity (as students make their own acting choices), self-confidence (because they successfully perform a role in front of an audience), teamwork (since students work with peers to craft a play), and self-discipline (which happens when our young actors memorize their lines).

As mentioned above, we use proprietary scripts for our drama club productions. Many of them are based on classic folktales or other familiar stories, but with modern, "fractured fairy tale" twists. They also frequently include an SEL connection. For example, in our telling of "The Emperor's New Clothes," a

pair of popular middle school girls take the place of the emperor. Some of their conniving peers decide to take the popular girls down a notch. These schemers dream up a mythical store at the mall that sells invisible clothes . . . invisible, that is, to anyone who's lame or uncool! Will the popular girls be vain enough to believe them, and parade into school the next day wearing invisible fashions? Our telling of the story invites inquiry about popularity, peer pressure, vanity, and bullying.

We evaluate all of our out of school time programs (not just Center Stage) through parent and student surveys. Our surveys have shown that 93% of parents feel that their children both enjoyed and benefited from drama club, while 94% of summer camp students say that they enjoyed the program.

### **Process for hiring, training, and evaluating performance/effectiveness.**

We have a three-step hiring process for teaching artists. First, candidates express their interest in working for us by completing an online mini-application. Often, they've seen one of our postings in a social media group like "Louisville Auditions" on Facebook. Second, we invite applicants who have meaningful experience with both theatre and school-age children to participate in a phone interview. Third, the most promising candidates are invited to an in-person interview. We intentionally strive for a hiring pool that includes diverse candidates.

At the interview, we expect candidates to teach us a short theatre lesson appropriate for the grade levels we work with, and direct two Drama by George staff members in an excerpt from one of the scripts we use for drama clubs. (We compensate interviewees for the time spent preparing these items.) While the candidates teach their lessons, our staff members do their best to act like students, which allows us to evaluate candidates' classroom management skills. We then make hiring decisions, check references, and extend offers of employment to the successful candidates.

Our initial orientation for teaching artists takes 6-8 hours. We introduce new employees to the curriculum they'll be teaching, ensuring that they're comfortable with what they'll be asked to do with their students. New hires also observe an experienced teaching artist in action (usually leading a drama club) before they begin working with their own students.

During each teaching artist's first semester with us, the artistic director will observe them leading a rehearsal, then provide both verbal and written feedback. These coaching opportunities are a good chance to reinforce what teaching artists are doing well, and catch any struggles they may be having early in the game.

### **How are participants of all backgrounds and abilities included in programming?**

Our efforts to include students with differing abilities in drama clubs begin even before the program does. When parents let us know about a student's learning differences or other differences in abilities during the registration process, we communicate that to the teaching artist who will be working with the child. That allows them to accommodate the students' needs. For example, one simple but effective

accommodation for a child with ADHD can be allowing them to walk around in the back of the room during a session to release energy (instead of insisting that the child remain seated).

We specifically address implicit bias during our training process. We ask teaching artists to be cognizant of how students' differences--whether race/ ethnicity, gender identity, physical appearance, or anything else- -may affect the teacher's opinion of the child. We believe that being aware of our biases is a good first step towards eliminating them.

When we become aware of ways in which a student's differences may be affecting their participation in drama club, we sometimes have a brief coaching session with the teaching artist to discuss strategies for working effectively with this student. We also frequently reach out to parents to make them aware of what we've been seeing in drama clubs and invite their suggestions for accommodating their child. When we produce a play in a drama club, every child receives a meaningful speaking part of at least 3 lines, ensuring that everyone is able to participate fully in the experience of rehearsing and performing a play.

We practice colorblind casting in drama clubs. That is, we may cast an onstage "family" with a Black mother, a Latinx father, and a white daughter. We also work diligently to ensure that various races and ethnicities are always depicted in our marketing materials and other visuals used in our programming.

## **How do I engage teachers and community center staff before, during, and after programming?**

During the program scheduling process, we work hard to communicate our logistical needs clearly to school staff so that we can provide them with excellent programming to the students. (For example, we might let them know we need a large room without obstructions for a workshop focused on physical theatre.) We also take into account what our school or community partners communicate to us about the students, even if it's as simple as their ages. (For example, if a school tells us that a drama club — which usually includes students in grades 3-5 — will be all 5th graders instead, we can prepare for an older, more mature group.

During the program, we often explicitly ask for staff engagement. For example, we tell schools that it's best for teachers to sit with their students during our assembly performances. During workshops, we appreciate it when teachers help to manage the classroom by coaching or correcting individual students, since they know the kids better than we do and have more control over the environment. But the best teacher engagement happens when an educator jumps in and plays along--for example, by participating in the workshop activities along with their students!

For all of our most popular programs, we have follow-up discussion guides and curriculum materials that we share with teachers. We recognize that the most effective learning often happens after we leave! At best, we have only a few hours with the students. When teachers incorporate students' learning into the classroom, they can take it much further than we ever could.

## **How do I engage participants in the creative and learning process?**

In our experience, most students are naturally drawn to hands-on learning, and most students enjoy expressing their creativity! All of our programs are based on interactive learning (theatre games, activities, and rehearsal) that empowers students to craft theatre. That means that often, students are excited to participate in our programs just because they involve hands-on creativity!

However, students may be reluctant to jump in at first because of peer pressure: "What will my friends think if I perform in front of the group?" That's why our workshops generally begin with whole-group activities that invite everyone to get creative at once. Also, our workshops are typically scaffolded with the most basic and "user-friendly" content at the beginning, and more complex, challenging material coming later. One of the most rewarding things for us as arts educators is when we see students who were initially stand-off-ish engage more deeply in a workshop as it progresses.

Our workshops almost always culminate in some kind of student performance. While we never force anyone to perform in front of the group, inviting students to individually express themselves creatively to their peers is a highly engaging strategy to help them demonstrate what they've learned.