

# Why drama for children?

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• Theo Heras •



*Alix Sideris and David Hersh, 1995*

**Résumé:** David Hersh et Alix Sideris enseignent le théâtre et l'écriture théâtrale aux enfants de la région d'Ottawa et collaborent avec deux troupes, le Théâtre La Salamandre pour les jeunes auditoires et les Jeunes Acteurs d'Orléans. Dans cette entrevue, ils présentent leur approche pédagogique, de la maternelle à l'école secondaire, laquelle vise à favoriser la découverte de soi et la constitution de l'esprit de groupe. Ils examinent la différence entre le texte et le jeu théâtral, présentent le mouvement comme moyen de définir le personnage et, enfin, précisent les aptitudes que développe la pratique du théâtre.

**Abstract:** David Hersh and Alix Sideris teach drama and theatre to children in the Ottawa area, working with two different companies: Salamander Theatre for Young Audiences and Orleans Young Players (OYP). This interview discusses their approach to drama from preschool to high school: it is a means both to individual self-discovery and to group-building. They examine the differences between drama and theatre, discuss movement as a method of finding character, and show how drama develops life-skills.

**Theo Heras:** David, Alix, tell us a little about yourselves. When did you start drama?

**David Hersh:** In senior kindergarten. I participated in an after-school program through elementary school, had drama classes in junior high, and took drama all through high school. At Concordia University, I began in Drama, but majored in Drama in Education.

**Alix Sideris:** I began late. I auditioned in the fifth grade and got the lead role. In seventh and eighth grade I took drama.

**Heras:** *What attracted you to drama?*

**Hersh:** Playing. My first instructor was Ilene Cummings, a local actor and parent in the neighbourhood. She introduced creative play or adventure drama — they're two different terms for essentially the same thing. Ilene would give us a scene and a character, or we would choose the scene as a group and pick our own characters, and then we would play. We had lots of furniture in the classroom. We could build a ship or an island and then play within that scene.

**Sideris:** I fell in love with drama in grade five. In junior high I had an excellent drama teacher, Barbara Gales, at Wilfrid Laurier Junior High in Montreal. She introduced me to the world of drama as opposed to theatre — and also to the world of teaching drama. I found a creative outlet for expressing all of my teenage angst. She gave me a forum, a safe environment for that.

**Heras:** *Drama was important to the two of you as children. Let's jump right into the big question and perhaps we'll work backwards: Why drama for children?*

**Sideris:** I believe that drama is inherently therapeutic. Involvement in the creative process opens a path for discovering and understanding one's self.

**Hersh:** What I like best about drama is that it's social. You interact with other people and work on something together. It's cooperative, it's collective, it's a chance to socialize and there is a lot of group interaction. Drama is also problem-solving; it's creative problem-solving. Drama is about self-discovery, discovering or defining personal space. Drama is about finding out what you are good at. Drama is about risk-taking, putting yourself on the line. It is also group-building. The two go together. When you feel comfortable with the group you are willing to take risks and you grow as an individual.

**Heras:** *How old do you think children should be before they are introduced to drama?*

**Sideris:** I've worked with children as young as three. Children start creative play at an early age. The kind of drama you do with a three-year-old is different from the drama you do with a four- or five-year-old. They all have different levels. Teaching drama to the very young is creative play with some rules. That is what drama is: it's creative play and creating boundaries with some rules around it.

**Hersh:** I worked with three-year-olds at a daycare in Montreal, teaching once a week for forty-five minutes. The younger you are the easier it is to do drama because it's all make-believe, it's still pretend. At the daycare, I used a thematic approach. For example, one day I brought in a pair of shoes and we did things with feet and shoes. We played a lot of foot games and experienced different kinds of foot movement. For example, what would it feel like to be walking in someone else's shoes or walking on the moon, and so on. I would read or tell a story that had to do with the theme and we would act out the story, or take the idea of the story and do it ourselves, or use the foot theme to do something else.

**Heras:** *How about work with five- to eight-year-olds?*

**Hersh:** Kids at five or six still have a sense of play. In mixed groups, you can still involve the seven- and eight-year-olds in play. That's where the social element



*Salamander Theatre for Young Audiences  
Acting Up Workshop*

comes in. The success of the class is dependent on the group. As a teacher I have to follow along and find out what the sense of the group is before I can design the program. I go into the first class with a plan and try to assess the class and then try the next day; but things are constantly changing. I find it very difficult to plan a full year. You do, because you say, "This is where I want to start and these are all of the things I want to do." But if the kids have missed B, C and F, you've got to find a way to pick them up. You work with the group and not against it or nothing comes out. Six-, seven- and eight-year-olds usually find their own way.

**Heras:** *Let's move up the ladder. What about children in mid-grade (grades 5 to 8)?*

**Hersh:** Mid-grade. It's such an awkward stage for them. Physically they're growing faster. Socially things change. They go from being most important person in the school to being the least important: the whole social scene has changed. Socializing becomes a much greater part of your life. I find that those children who haven't had drama by this age are very self-conscious about how they act. They're also at an age where they are challenging everything. I find it a very difficult age to work with. So what do you do? You want to create a safe environment for them to explore whatever they like and whatever they want. I treat the children respectfully and usually get respect back.

**Heras:** *I can imagine that body work is very difficult with kids that age not only because they are self-conscious, but also, as you said, because they grow so fast and their bodies are constantly changing.*

**Hersh:** What I usually do with kids that age is find the fun, find the games, the playing, and make that okay. We focus on games and not on the body. Once the kids discover the fun, they become more comfortable. The problem is that sometimes they don't know when to stop and that's hard to deal with.

**Heras:** *I'd like to digress a moment. You taught a Shakespeare program this past summer. Can you describe it? What made you decide to do it? How old were the children involved? What play did you do?*

**Hersh:** The “Scottish” play. It was with Salamander Theatre’s program called “Simply Shakespeare.” The children were ten to fourteen years old and each got a little bit of script. We learned the rhythm of Shakespeare. We learned the rhythm vocally; we learned the rhythm physically. We talked about Shakespeare’s time. We talked a lot about status. A lot of Shakespeare is built on one situation: the king does wrong. What does that mean to the whole hierarchy in the society? We talked about status and about where people’s status might be. We played status games.

**Heras:** *Describe a status game.*

**Hersh:** Master-Servant. The master says, “Tie my shoes,” and the servant ties the shoes. Whatever the master says the servant has to do. Then we reverse the roles so everyone understands both roles. We also use playing cards with numbers one to ten, taking ten as the king and one as the criminal. In a pair, you play the difference. Sometimes one and four are together, sometimes one and eight. We also discovered where the students placed different people in our society in terms of status and that was an interesting social study. For the “Simply Shakespeare” program we discussed Shakespeare’s time, but I have since applied the game to modern-day. For example, between one and ten where does a doctor lie? Where is the lawyer? Where is the garbage collector?

**Heras:** *And where is the actor, David? Did you ask the kids?*

**Hersh:** No [laugh]. But depending on their age, they would have said different things. Probably high, because they all think of movie stars. What gives people status: money or power? Those are the kinds of questions we explored.

**Heras:** *It sounds as if you’re talking about sociology.*

**Hersh:** Theatre encompasses everything. We took aspects of Shakespearean theatre and found games and broke it down to what is necessary in it. We followed the story line and looked at themes such as witchcraft and black magic. We played around with the themes. The kids got a lot out of it and were able to recite complete pieces of text.

**Heras:** *What are you trying to accomplish when you work with children?*

**Sideris:** Ultimately as a facilitator in drama, I want to create a safe environment where self-exploration is safe and acceptable. Drama provides a forum for kids to learn how to think creatively. That process is inherently therapeutic and enriching and I believe that everyone needs drama in their lives.

**Hersh:** All of my classes start with and end in a circle where we find out how everyone is doing. It helps to build the group and when you feel comfortable in the group, you’re willing to take risks. The circle gives the kids a chance to say, “Oh, I’m feeling like this or I’m feeling like that” and you’re accepted by the group for however you feel.

**Heras:** *That kind of acceptance doesn’t happen in many places.*

**Hersh:** No, it doesn’t happen in many places and it doesn’t happen naturally even in drama. A group has to feel safe and you have to do exercises that allow the members of the group to feel safe with one another so that they can speak openly. Once you achieve that in the group, then their self-confidence grows. I’ve had a

lot of parents come up to me and say, "My daughter never used to do this before." Even the kids say it themselves.

**Heras:** *I know both of you are interested in movement and the physical aspects of drama. Can you talk about the importance of movement?*

**Hersh:** I do things with personal space — kinespheres. How does my body move inside my space? Everyone finds [his/her] space in the room and then moves inside that space. How high can you go and how low? How far frontward and backward? How fast can you go when you move in your space? We learn where our space is. Everyone else has a space like that. I use physical warm-ups, physical games: statues, freezes, tableaux — those kinds of things. And I use the Laban method.

**Heras:** *Could you briefly describe the Laban method?*

**Sideris:** Rudolf Laban was a choreographer who revolutionized dance in the 1940s. David and I apply Laban in drama as an organic way of discovering character and voice. The method was introduced to us by Brian Doubt and Anne Skinner, and we have adapted it to our work with children. In the Laban method, there are eight basic movement characters which are derived from different centres of movement in the body. When you experience these characters organically they become part of your movement vocabulary. It transcends physical ability and can be adapted for people with physical and mental disabilities.

**Hersh:** Some of my students just loved doing Laban because it was a lot easier for them to find the emotion through a physical route. When you have a class of thirty kids you want to reach everyone at one point so you incorporate different methods of teaching. The students experience something they're comfortable with, and in the process they get to explore and find other methods too and learn to be comfortable with them. All in a safe environment.

**Heras:** *If this were a perfect world and you could do whatever you wanted to do in terms of drama with children, ideally what would you want to do?*

**Sideris:** Something very magical happens when someone incorporates drama in [her] curriculum and I'm happy with it just being there. Not everyone is inclined to add it. Salamander Theatre, for example, meets with teachers and helps them develop their drama vocabulary. I'm happy with schools that provide drama classes. Not many do. Instead of having a production at the end of the year, I'd rather see schools offer drama, like art, as part of their curriculum.

**Heras:** *Discuss the difference between drama and theatre.*

**Sideris:** Theatre is product-oriented and drama is process-oriented. I have preferred to do the process-oriented programs.

**Hersh:** My junior high school drama teacher, Elaine Vine, defined drama as developmental and exploring. Theatre is performance.

**Heras:** *Process is very important to you, David. Could you comment on that?*

**Hersh:** You know, it's funny. We work for two companies. With Salamander Theatre, we do workshops, so we do no product at all. At Orleans Young Players, the parents are expecting a product. We build skills, but in the end there has to be a product. The older classes at OYP perform for schools and they have to sell the



*Members of Encore! Performing A Midsummer Night's Dream.  
Kathleen Frost (top left), Celine (top right), Jamie Dee Franklin  
(bottom left), Jen Jarvis (bottom right).*

show so there's a financial element to it. The road to the product is the process and I can emphasize that. Process is important because it encompasses the exploration, the development: all those steps along the way make it the kids' own experience. But I've begun to enjoy working toward an end product. Initially we can focus on process, the building work, and then we can use those tools to make something together.

**Heras:** *This leads us to talk about Encore! This theatre company was your initiative. You went with the idea to Karen Freeborn, Artistic Director at Orleans Young Players.*

**Hersh:** Yes, I borrowed the idea from my grade 13 drama program called Theatre 55 at Oakwood Collegiate Institute in Toronto and Mr. Bob Beatty, my teacher there. I started to think about doing this kind of program while I was working with older kids last year. We were supposed to produce "A Midsummer Night's Dream" with two classes. I had thirty kids and a play with 22 roles, eight of which were fairies. A majority of the kids were going to be fairies and this was after twenty weeks of classes! I thought, this doesn't work. The first thing I did was split up the classes into two plays. The older class did "A Midsummer Night ..." but I had fourteen girls in the class. So now I have a play with most of the roles male. But I have females. Maybe we should have done a play that had all female roles so that they could have played their gender. With those kinds of concerns in mind, I went to Karen Freeborn and *Encore!* came to be. The program has been initiated for kids who are interested in pursuing theatre or who really like doing theatre and want to experience it more fully. Karen liked the idea. This added a new dimension to OYP's program, taking it a step further. In early July 1996, we held auditions for twelve- to eighteen-year-old kids. We selected ten young people.

**Heras:** *How did you promote it?*

**Hersh:** The promotion was directed to students of Orleans Young Players. In

*Encore!* they would be involved in all aspects of the theatre. *Encore!* has a season of three shows. Everyone is guaranteed a significant acting part in one of the shows. The plays reflect the group, which is made up of eight females and two males. The season is a mix of three different genres: drama, comedy and suspense.

**Heras:** *What are the plays?*

**Hersh:** "The Children's Hour," by Lillian Hellman is the first play we'll be doing in December; "Clue in the Fast Lane," by Beverly Cooper and Anne Marie MacDonald is the comedy we'll produce in March; and the third play is "I'll Be Back before Midnight," a thriller, by Peter Colley. The plays incorporate three different styles of theatre: "The Children's Hour" is realistic. It's a time piece. We're setting in the early 1940s. The kids have to find period costumes and all the set designs have to reflect that period. The second play, "Clue in the Fast Lane," is not as realistic. It moves from the car to people's houses to nightclubs — it moves all over the place — so the set is going to be totally different and need a special kind of design. The costumes and props will also be different. The third play, "I'll Be Back before Midnight," has a lot of technical effects in it. The set has to be precise. There are explosions and there are fights with axes. There are blocking details. The script actually comes with a guide on how to produce the special effects. With the three plays we have a variety of theatre production and experience.

**Heras:** *What do members of the company do?*

**Hersh:** There are lots of things to think about. At company meetings we initially talked about what jobs there are in the theatre and who would be doing those jobs: designers — including props, costumes, sets, lights, sound, program and tickets; builders — making or finding costumes, building the sets or finding the pieces, putting the set up, focusing the lights — doing all of the technical things. The kids are also in charge of promotion — selling tickets and subscriptions. The company is financially responsible. The kids have to make sure that tickets get sold. They're also in charge of front-of-house: who's ushering, what are the ticket prices, when to start the show — how many people to wait for; keep reservations, keep all the tickets, all the subscriptions; sales — keep all those records; refreshment sales at intermission — food and drink, etc. The front-of-house person is in charge of all of that. Then there's stage management. The stage manager looks after the play once it's up. In this case, the stage manager is also the assistant director. It's not usually the case, but I gave the assistant director a scene to direct. I believe that when you do theatre, the more you understand about the complete production process, the better off you are.

**Heras:** *Can you explain?*

**Hersh:** For example, the more you know about lighting as an actor, the easier it is for you to find the hot spot in the light. Some actors don't know those things and just act and forget about everyone else. But a play may include four or five other actors and there are maybe thirty other people creating the piece and it's nice to be aware of what everyone is doing and how it's done. The kids are acting in the plays as well. One of the things that I do is develop individual acting techniques for finding character.

**Heras:** *The students are also learning acting.*

**Hersh:** Not just acting — both acting and techniques. They're learning how to find character. [In] some of the plays I've cast opposite to type so that the kids can experience something different ... Because that's the whole thing! Encore! has two components: It's a functioning company that has to make money so that it can run; and as well, it's a learning theatre company — people are doing it to learn. To give them non-challenging parts isn't learning. I give them challenges.

**Heras:** *I find it interesting that there is this financial responsibility as well. It's no longer fun and games but a serious endeavour. . .*

**Hersh:** Well, that's the thing. Besides everything else, it's running a company. That's a whole process too. It's all making something work.

**Heras:** *The emphasis here is on company, not theatre.*

**Hersh:** A lot of people don't know that. In the theatre scene now in order for actors to work, they often have to form their own company. People go into it not knowing all the different elements involved. A thirteen-year-old in Encore! now knows what it means to run a production company and to be responsible for it. It's learning life skills. As a teacher of drama and a director, I am able to develop skills, take part in the creative process with kids, watch them grow and have loads of fun doing it. It's the perfect work for me.

**Heras:** *Thank you very much.*

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*David Hersh and Alix Sideris both graduated with degrees in Drama in Education from Concordia. Now married, they live in the Ottawa area with their eighteen-month-old daughter, Hannah. David has directed for Encore! and for Orleans Young Players and Salamander Theatre. Alix is a co-founder of How 'bout us!/Moondragon Interactive Clowning Company. She co-wrote and directed "Aurora Awakes" for Windsor Women's Festival (95). Both David and Alix have played a variety of roles in community theatre; clowned with Prospero's Fools in Windsor; studied at Bread and Puppet Theatre, Vermont, with Peter Schumann; and lectured at the University of Windsor.*

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