

NOTES FROM THE CLASSROOM

How do you do a play about latitude and longitude....?

Perhaps because of his twenty years' experience as a magician, David Moreland (who will perform at the Hangar in August as part of the KIDDSTUFF Plus Series) was up to the challenge of working with fourth graders at Fall Creek Elementary School to help them write and perform a play about those tricky geographical coordinates.

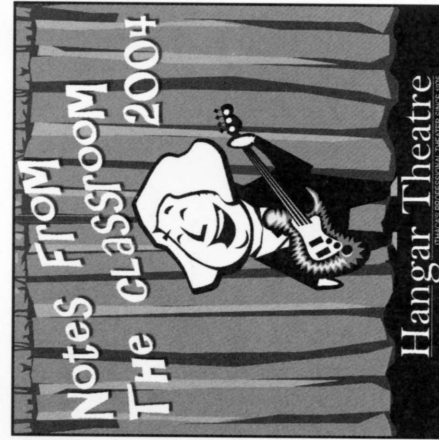
For ten years the Hangar has inspired Ithaca fourth graders who create plays based on their school's curriculum, covering everything from the story of the Erie Canal to grammar and punctuation. It's all done with funding from the Ithaca School District and the New York State Council on the Arts, through the Empire State Partnerships program.

The Hangar program was launched in 1996 as part of a state wide initiative of the New York State Council on the

Arts and the New York State Education Department. Their mission: help students learn better by integrating arts into classrooms. "We're fortunate to live in a state that values using arts in education," says Pete Rush, the Hangar's Education and Outreach Coordinator (and the costume designer for *I Am My Own Wife*). "After ten years we've got this format down," he adds. "It's a really good model." The Hangar is now expanding the program to Trumansburg and Lansing.

Here's how it works.

Ten teaching artists and three musicians, drawn from Hangar Mainstage artists and Next Generation teachers, start meeting with fourth grade teachers every February. The teachers choose topics, and the artists develop exercises that will encourage fourth graders to write and perform plays about those topics. Once the plays are written, musicians come in and help the students write a song to go with their show. For the past two years, those songs have



The 2004 CD, of the ESP project songs, is available for sale in the lobby now.

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been recorded on CD for students, parents, and the community to enjoy. (It's available in the lobby—check it out!)

As well as coordinating the program, Rush also teaches, and he clearly loves every minute. "We are as excited and clueless as the students," he says. "Except, of course, we have some tricks up our sleeves." The teachers help to manage the class and content, reminding students about books they have read and assignments they have done on the subject.

"Teachers really value the project," explains Kim Fontana, Director of Staff Development and Research for ICSD. Partly as a result of teacher support, the program is now mandatory for all ICSD fourth grade classes. "It would be inequitable to have some kids go without, and it's a common experi-



Students at Trumansburg Elementary School perform their play to an audience of parents and teachers.

ence that fifth grade and middle school teachers can call upon," says Fontana. "It's much more powerful when all the students do it."

The schoolteachers also learn techniques they can carry over into other aspects of their work. "I see a lot of change in the teachers," says Fontana. "The Hangar artists are excellent collaborators, and our teachers get a lot of new tools from them." She also appreciates the Hangar's flexibility in scheduling, working around a demanding school schedule of testing and learning.

"Fourth grade is a very busy year for the kids," Fontana notes. "Kids have to start reading to learn. Before fourth grade, a lot of their time is spent learning to read." The new academic focus can be tough for some students. "It's an important time to remind kids, teachers, and everyone that there are other ways of learning," Fontana says. For example, let's get back to latitude and longitude. "Those can be just words that you are supposed to memorize, but when you get your body behind them, moving through space, the symbol becomes much more important," she explains.

David Moreland's students dealt with the geographical problem by writing a story where they, as students, discov-

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ONE GUY 35 CHARACTERS

"You are solely responsible for the entire evening. You have to tell the entire story alone. The audience has nowhere else to look but at you," says actor Harry Bouvy. Both he and director Wendy Dann relished the difficult task of creating 35 people for *I Am My Own Wife*.

"I love doing a one-man show because I love and admire actors," Dann says. "I find Harry fascinating because he seems to have a limitless well of people inside him."

Dann and Bouvy have a lot of experience with multi-character shows. Dann directed Chesapeake for the Kitchen Theatre and Syracuse Stage, and worked with Rachel Lampert to develop *The Soup Comes Last* at the Kitchen. Bouvy has also performed in *Chesapeake*, as well as in *Fully Committed*. Dann and Bouvy also worked together on the multi-character *Stones in His Pockets*, where two men play 13 characters.

"A multi-character show allows the audience to actually see the character transform from one character to the

next, which normally happens offstage," explains Dann. In a play with many actors the performer can use a range of gestures. But if there's only one person the actor must find a clear physical shape, gesture, and voice for each character. "If you don't know who it is in the first two seconds, you can get lost," Dann says.

Along with working on making characters clear, Dann serves as a coach. "I say things like, are you breathing, do you need a glass of water somewhere on the set, don't run back and forth across the stage too often or you'll never get through the evening," she explains.

Audiences do have to work a little harder in multi-character shows.

"In the first 20 minutes you can kind of feel the audience's resistance to the form itself," says Bouvy. "How is this guy going to pull off 35 different people so I know what's going on? But once characters start to recur and the audience recognizes them they are elated."



Harry Bouvy, in *Stones in His Pockets* at the Hangar, 2003