

## New Ground Gives Junior Theatre a Facelift

Written by Mike Schulz

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Chris Jansen, the artistic director of the New Ground Theatre, is a self-described “Junior Theatre kid,” and has the pictures to prove it. She thinks.

During an interview regarding New Ground’s recent merger with Davenport’s Junior Theatre, Jansen brings out several enormous photo albums, dating all the way back to 1957 and filled with black-and-white shots of children and instructors who’ve been involved in Junior Theatre productions over the years.

We see a picture of Mary Nighswander, the organization’s founder: “That’s everybody’s mentor,” Jansen says, “everybody who grew up here.”

Jansen finds a photo of Augustana College design head, and occasional New Ground costumer, Patty Koenigsaecker: “There she is when she was about 15.”

We continue to page through the books, encountering the youthful visages of many still living in the area – “There are so many people still around that did stuff here,” she says – but are still having no luck in finding Jansen herself.

“I just want to show you *me*,” she explains, “just to prove I was in here. You know, I spent years of my life here, and I can only find two pictures of myself. I’m like, ‘Where was I when the cameras were rolling?’”

Photographic evidence, however, is in no way required. Jansen speaks about Junior Theatre with so much involvement and excitement that the point is clear: Chris Jansen is a Junior Theatre kid, and she wants there to be many *more* Junior Theatre kids.

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The hope for that stems from Junior Theatre's recently announced merger with New Ground, the local professional theatre organization Jansen founded in 2002. New Ground is known for its presentation of edgier, more-modern fare than many of the area's other venues. It might seem strange that a relatively *outré* organization such as this would join forces with one devoted to the 18-and-under set, but Jansen believes that she and New Ground can offer Junior Theatre a long-overdue shot in the arm.

### History

Junior Theatre has now been a Quad Cities institution for close to 55 years, and began with the 1951 arrival of a performer named Mary Fluhrer. Fluhrer, Jansen says, "was a vaudeville actress, came through, played Davenport, and her husband died while she was here. So she stayed. She raised her kids here, and in 1951 she started offering a little theatre class for kids. And within a couple of years, it became a program."

Fluhrer, who would eventually become Mary Fluhrer Nighswander, taught courses and traveled with her young charges – ranging in age from four through late teens – to area schools and auditoriums, and interest in the program continued to grow. Yet Junior Theatre never had a place to call its own. "They moved everywhere," Jansen says. "They spent the first two, three decades of their existence moving from place to place."

Including, in one instance, a place closely tied to Jansen herself. She reveals, "My dad had a jewelry store downtown, and for a long time they were upstairs above the jewelry store, which was great for me, 'cause I could run upstairs for my class and then run back down again!"

Eventually, Junior Theatre found a permanent home on the Annie Wittenmeyer campus, where three cottages were offered to the organization by the City of Davenport. Included among them were a newly renovated theatre, where Junior Theatre has provided theatrical games, education, and entertainment for nearly 25 years.

The organization's influence has been profound. Just ask Patty Koenigsaecker, who might not have found her career as a scenic designer without Junior Theatre. Koenigsaecker reveals that she began at Junior Theatre at age six and stayed for, she adds with a laugh, "25 years": "I got on one of the crews and just kept working there," she says.

And she readily admits that Junior Theatre had "quite a lot" of influence on her life. Through Junior Theatre's field trips to the Guthrie Theatre in the early '60s, she realized, upon seeing that the venue employed a female scenic designer, that her tech-theatre options weren't limited to costume design. By the time Koenigsaecker was ready to take on theatre as a career, she was astonished to find that her professional goals weren't taken seriously in a business where women were expected to be solely *costume* designers. Regarding her scenic-design aspirations, she says, "It never occurred to me that you *couldn't* do that!"

### "Is That Still Around?"

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Junior Theatre has been, and continues to be, financially supported by Davenport itself, through the city's Parks & Recreation Department. "The city," says Jansen, "has one fund that pays for things like electric and phone and heat and my salary. That's all non-negotiable; that's the same every year. Then there's the other fund which I'm responsible for. That's the self-sustaining fund. ... That's what I bring in for classes, what I pay out for salaries, what I pay out for anything we need to get."

Yet despite the funding, Jansen admits that public awareness of the organization has slipped in recent years. "What I hear people say is, 'Is that still *around*?' " Since Junior Theatre's heyday in the 1970s, there has been very little information about the program in the newspapers, very few press releases, and no advertising. "Pretty much the audience for the shows have been the parents and the grandparents of the kids," Jansen says. "It's sort of slipped under the radar screen, and that's unfortunate."

Jansen says that the number of students Junior Theatre has welcomed has fluctuated over the years, but the 21st Century has seen the institution face a precipitous drop in enrollment. "We did a little research project," she adds. "We lost 100 kids a year for the last three years. We went from 500 to about 200.

"So we're going to reverse that trend in a big, giant way."

That reversal, Jansen hopes, begins with New Ground's involvement.

Jansen, who holds a B.A. in theatre from the University of Iowa and an M.F.A. in playwriting from Brandeis University, has worked with young people throughout her career in professional theatre – including at the Old Creamery Theatre as well as in Boston and Providence, Rhode Island.

And the timing for the partnership, Jansen says, couldn't have been better. "It became time for New Ground to have a youth component. People were bugging us; some people [were] calling New Ground ... and asking, 'Do you offer classes for kids?'"

Jansen laughs. "I got tired of saying 'no.'"

Junior Theatre loyalty, however, almost kept Jansen from pursuing the idea. "I said to my husband, who's the general manager for New Ground, 'I hate to compete with Junior Theatre, you know? It's kind of in decline, but I don't want to be the one that kills it – I grew up there.'"

The idea of a *partnership* with New Ground, however, sounded intriguing, both to the Jansens and to Jef Farland, then director of Davenport's Parks & Recreation department. ("We're the 'rec' part," explains Jansen.) Among points discussed, Jansen says, were "adding some of our technical expertise and contacts with people that do tech within the area." They pursued the idea of a three-step plan, in which New Ground would oversee Junior Theatre productions in the first year, take over the roster of classes the second, and fully merge by year three.

That the merger occurred in year *one* resulted from the announced retirement of Bonnie

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Gunther, who started as a Junior Theatre parent volunteer in the '60s, and who replaced program head Mary Nighswander after *her* retirement two decades ago. Jansen says Gunther “decided to retire in May [of 2005]. So I thought, rather than have someone else be in Bonnie’s job, it would sort of ease the whole transition if I just took over.

“Of course,” she adds, laughing, “I was *insane* at the time, and I haven’t slept or eaten or *sat down* since I started this job, but it’s been nothing but fun. So we just sort of speeded up [the process]. It’s all systems go.”

### Kicking Up the Expectations

While continuing to honor the intentions and legacy of the organization she grew up with, Jansen reveals that New Ground’s merger with Junior Theatre will yield some drastic changes in regards to the classes available and the productions performed.

“In the past,” she says, “we’ve offered sort of the same class,” which served as a basic introduction-to-theatre course. Junior Theatre’s students, Jansen says, would play theatre games and eventually perform a play ... and not, apparently, a very *good* play. “They were terrible, basically,” she admits. “They were like 15 minutes long, everybody had exactly the same number of lines, so no one really had any character development. These kids had to do one of these plays, memorized, costumed ... everything.

“I was re-thinking that,” says Jansen. “I thought, we don’t have any *levels* here. You know, we don’t have any ‘appropriate for young kids,’ ‘appropriate for middle-school ages,’ and we don’t have *anything* for the high school kids. *Nothin’*.”

A look at Junior Theatre’s fall syllabus reveals that, in its new incarnation, there will indeed be something for kids of all ages – the Creative Dramatics course, for instance, offers an introduction to theatre for ages four through six, and the Playwriting class is designed for those in grades nine through 12. In between, kids can enroll in everything from Comedy/Improv to Stage Combat.

Among the new courses offered are a Technical Theatre class taught by Michael McPeters, who has been involved in educational, community, and professional tech since 1968. “We’ll be starting with the fundamentals,” says McPeters of the class geared towards those in grades six through 12. “Sort of a 101 course, to get everyone on the same page.” The kids will learn about everything from scaffolding to the use of tools, but McPeters stresses that what kids will learn, above all else, is safety. “We want to do an overview and really hit everything, but the most important thing is to teach them [the students] to be safe.”

Whether it’s technical theatre or performance, education will always be Junior Theatre’s

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primary function. Kim Furness, a familiar area stage presence who has worked in professional theatre for more than a decade, will be teaching three acting courses for three different age groups, but also has workshops planned for the students' *continued* educations, particularly in regards to Junior Theatre's high schoolers. For those who may wish to pursue a career in theatre, Furness says she'll be paying special attention to "teaching acting techniques – all *sorts* of acting techniques," and will provide instruction on *audition* techniques as well (which, as any professional performer will tell you, could be a course in and of itself). "We want to give them some preparation for what it'll be like in college," says Furness.

Quite a change from the more basic "theatre games" classes Junior Theatre has offered in the past. "And we'll specialize further," Jansen adds, mentioning the possibility in future semesters of courses on lighting and advanced workshops in areas such as acting and playwriting. "We'll take our cue from their interests and specialize even more."

Jansen expects the organization's theatrical productions themselves to be as varied, challenging, and, above all, *fun*, as the courses Junior Theatre offers. After a recent visit to children's theatres in Milwaukee, Kansas City, and Hopkins, Minnesota, Jansen returned to the Quad Cities with a fresh perspective on what could be expected from youths. Jansen says she viewed those programs' participants – including young children vigorously performing musical theatre and Shakespeare – with awe, particularly at Hopkins' Stages Theatre. "They were *fabulous*!" she raves. "They were kicking up the expectations and the kids were *loving* it. So that made me think, you know, we can be a little more enthusiastic around here if we want."

It is in the selection of plays, in fact, that New Ground's influence on Junior Theatre will be most strongly felt; the organization's roster of children's productions for 2005-6 – on paper at least – looks as offbeat and challenging as the more adult works New Ground is primarily known for. "You can do some real hip stuff with kids and they'll catch on," she says, adding, "Kids don't need to be talked down to."

And Jansen is delighted with the main-stage shows picked for the coming year, including *How to Eat Like a Child*, which Jansen calls "kind of a user's manual ... how to bug your brother in the car, that sort of thing" and an adaptation of Kevin Kling's popular children's book *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse* ("This Kevin Kling adaptation," Jansen raves, "is *great* . I mean, it's hysterically funny for *everyone*, you know?"). And at some point next summer, Junior Theatre will be presenting a production of

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### *The Tempest*

Uh ... as in William *Shakespeare's The Tempest*? Won't that be difficult?

"No, not really," Jansen says in full confidence. "I mean, yeah, we have to go through and figure out what everything means. But once you know what you're saying, you can be understood. We did *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (at Junior Theatre) a few years ago. I directed that, the kids had a great time, and everybody loved it.

"And my dream is to get some area alumni involved in that, too," she says. "So if you were in Junior Theatre and you want to get involved in our summer *Tempest* show, I'd be interested!"

There will also be, Jansen reveals, at least one other change in store for Junior Theatre as a result of their merger with the New Ground Theatre: the organization's *de facto* mascot, Showtime Pal, will have his visibility noticeably decreased.

The floppy-shoed character, who was created as a teaching tool for very young children in the mid-'50s, became a fixture in Junior Theatre productions for numerous years, performing warm-up routines and entertaining the crowds at intermission. But "what ended up happening," Jansen says, "was with the audiences being mostly people's parents, Showtime Pal would get up and extort a bunch of middle-aged people to stand up and sing 'Head, Shoulders, Knees, & Toes.' I asked a friend of mine, 'Why don't you bring your kids to Junior Theatre shows?' and she said, 'Well, frankly, I don't want to stand up and sing at intermission.'

"If it's keeping people away," admits Jansen, "it's probably not something we need to keep."

But, good Junior Theatre Kid that she is, Jansen is quick to add that Showtime Pal is not being put out to pasture just yet. "He's definitely going to be a public-relations person," she says, "but he's not gonna make you sing anymore."

*Junior Theatre is currently enrolling students for its fall semester. Further information on both Junior Theatre and New Ground Theatre is available through Chris Jansen at (563) 326-7862 extension 2.*