

ILLINOIS STYLE: Kids learn the forgotten art of vaudeville

By JANET ZOHORSKY | The (Aurora) Beacon-News

ST. CHARLES, Ill. - Every once in a while, you meet a person who is genuine and does for others out of pure joy instead of personal financial gain. Donna Dickinson of Palatine is such a person. Not only has she been teaching the forgotten traditions of vaudeville to school-age children since 1993, she has made next to no money doing it. And yet, she carries on, and with gusto.

"There's totally nothing professional about what we do," she says, "it's for kids who want to be on stage. My main goal is to keep my kids having fun and keep this as cheap as possible." Dickinson accepts any child into her program, (which is organized by five-week sessions), who want to perform. Auditions are what you would expect, but she, in fact, scoops up any child who has failed an audition to get a part in local theater. Teaching them a vaudeville act is freeing, fun and requires minimal experience.

The greatest reward Dickinson has received is the fact that children return year and after year to perform with her, and that the Arcada Theater in [St. Charles](#) now gives her access to teach on its vaudeville stage. The partnership couldn't be a better match. The theater was originally built for vaudeville, and Dickinson has one of the few vaudeville children's troupes in the country. They found each other through the Internet.

Dickinson has a library of choreographed skits she has created over the years, and easily leaps into the mix of children as she teaches them an [Al Jolson](#) routine, singing the song, "Swanee" While going through the lyrics with four children, she explains it along the way.

"Who does he want to go home to?" she shouts out.

One child answers: "his wife?" Another belts out: "his hamster!" Everyone has a good laugh. But no, the answer is, his mother. And just like that, Dickinson teaches children, whose contemporaries are mostly playing video games on the couch at home in the afterschool hours, a little theater and a little history. Names like [Will Rogers](#), [Edgar Bergen](#) and Charlie McCarthy, Baby [Rose Marie](#) and the Marx Brothers are but a few she shares with the newest generation of children.

The rehearsal carries on. A little "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" with nerf bats, and a little juggling with colored scarves...making it irrelevant if they drop one.

Dickinson says, "the most memorable shows are when things go wrong because adults are so forgiving of children." She recalls a show when a little boy went out on stage and presented a box to the audience, announcing as he opened it that, "as they could see, it was empty." But, unfortunately it was not. The rabbit was still in the box from rehearsal. Dickinson recalls how the audience thought that was hilarious, and she went out on stage, took away the rabbit, and the boy began again, announcing, "now it's empty!"

A trained figure skater who spent her early career in professional ice shows, Dickinson latched onto vaudeville when her own children were intrigued by it, and she couldn't find them a teacher or a class anywhere. She was accustomed to choreographing and coordinating ice shows, so it wasn't a stretch for her to move into vaudeville theater. She did some research, and began teaching.

She currently owns enough books, memorabilia and props from the vaudeville era to start a small museum, and in fact, she and the owner of the Arcada are talking about launching one.

But for now, Dickinson will keep on doing what she does best -- inspiring young children. For her, there is no greater high.