

Children’s theater, reimagined and revolutionized

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TPO Company and Interactive Theatre of Prato, Italy, will be in Aspen this weekend to conduct workshops with children from Aspen Elementary School and Aspen Country Day School. The experimental theater program has won awards all over the world. Courtesy of TPO

When it comes to theater in elementary schools, one thinks about styrofoam trees, wooden houses and children at the front of the stage singing songs.

TPO Company and Interactive Theatre subverts that paradigm by creating pioneering, multi-disciplinary performances that meld music, dance, art, sculpture, digital media, lighting and sound into a one-of-a-kind immersive experience for children ages 4-10.

TPO, founded in 1999 in Prato, Italy, will be in Aspen this weekend for workshops with elementary school children from Aspen Elementary School and Aspen Country Day School. The theater company’s work will be on display to the public today at the Wheeler Opera House for a 6 p.m. performance (doors open at 5:30 p.m.). Seating is limited to only 60 people.

“This year, we’ve ramped up our outreach efforts at the Wheeler and across the Roaring Fork Valley by collaborating with local schools to deliver specialized educational programs,” said Malia Machado, programs administrator and outreach-educational coordinator for the opera house. “We’re thrilled to provide unique opportunities like this, enriching the lives of local youth and igniting their passion for the arts.”

TPO has earned awards for innovation and artistry in China, Italy, Poland, Spain and the United States. The company has received numerous accolades for its approach to education and the arts.

In TPO shows, students and the adults sit on the stage along with the two dancers to create an intimate atmosphere – the children sit on the floor while the adults sit in chairs. The dancers invite children in the audience to join them in creative movement. Images and sounds interface with the children as they use their bodies to “paint” and “play music” with the ever-changing visuals onstage, transforming live gestures and virtual landscapes into an interactive gallery.



Children dance in a performance of “Erbo: A Forest in the City” produced by TPO Company and Interactive Theatre. Courtesy of TPO

Valentina Consoli is one of the dancers in the production. She hails from Italy and has been with TPO since 2014. Her background is in ballet, contemporary dance and she has also served as a choreographer. The interaction with the children is what drew her to TPO.

“The main goal is to let the children explore,” Consoli said. “It happens very organically. Our shows are immersive. Once the children are on stage they are inside the show, they are part of it. Dance is a universal language, it is easy to communicate with the body. Sometimes kids

surprise us by doing things we did not expect. Sometimes we lead them and other times they lead us. It’s a game we play. It’s fascinating.”

The other dancer in the show is Bèla Dobiasova, who hails from the Czech Republic. She moved to Italy five years ago and was immediately drawn to TPO.

“You usually go on tour and perform in a work that is very scripted,” Dobiasova said. “The story is the same every night. But our shows are very fluid. We decide what to do and when to go to the next scene. It makes it real, you react in that moment. Working with the kids and seeing them come to life, particularly the shy ones, is wonderful. I never know what is going to happen at each performance and that keeps it exciting.”

While every performance is different because of the improvisation between the dancers and the children, there is a basic plot involved in the piece. For example, one is called “Erbo: A Forest in the City,” and involves the story of the development of an urban community.

One of the dancers acts as the architect, laying out houses and streets in the landscape, while the other dancer focuses on nature, drawing grass and trees onto two large projector screens. As the city evolves, children contribute by coloring and populating it but inevitably the harmony is challenged by the forces of growth in the form of a factory being built in the town.

In response, the dancers, alongside the children, help create a new space where nature thrives, culminating in a “tree concert” symbolizing their shared dream of a city in harmony with nature.

For this specific performance, Lisa Rigsby Peterson, executive director of the Wheeler, approached Davide Venturini, artistic director of TPO, and asked him to create an original adaptation of “A Forest in the City” specifically with the landscape of Aspen and the Roaring Fork Valley’s character, monuments and ecosystem as the inspiration.

Last May, Venturini came to Aspen and studied the landscapes and architecture of the Roaring Fork Valley to use for a one-of-a-kind production of “Forest in the City.”

“After a week in Aspen last spring with the company, Davide created a gorgeous show that reflects so many recognizable and inspiring elements of our community,” Peterson said. “We at the Wheeler are very proud to share this special show with children and families.

“I have worked with TPO for six years, and seen the impact that their wonder-inducing visual, dance and interactive creative work has on children and adults alike. This is artistic work of the highest quality, created specifically for young children to engage their hearts and minds. It’s visually stunning, and the journey that the dancers take the audience members on is enchanting and magical and I know that the memories that they make with TPO on the Wheeler stage will last for a long time.”

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