

ACT II playhouse

World-class theatre • intimate venue

For Immediate Release: July 28, 2008

Press Contact: Rosemarie DeLuca, 215-431-7587 or roe@act2.org

AMBLER, PA – Act II Playhouse has created an innovative drama outreach program for children on the autism spectrum. A six-week introductory session of the program, called STAGES at Act II Playhouse, has begun this summer, with six children participating in weekly classes that will culminate in a short final performance at Act II on Saturday, Aug. 9th.

STAGES utilizes drama, movement and games to connect meaningfully with children who have a range of communication and social challenges. The goal is to build on shared attention and improve social interactions.

Little has been done in the theatre community to reach children with autism. Recognizing this, Act II Playhouse has teamed up with Barrymore Award-winning actor Pete Pryor to create a community-based program that will reach this underserved population. Act II Marketing Director Rosemarie DeLuca is Program Coordinator for STAGES – and has been working closely with Pryor, along with his wife, actress Juliette Dunn Pryor, to develop the program. The STAGES modality is based on experience all three have with children on the autism spectrum, including their own sons.

For Pete Pryor, theatre is a natural tool to connect with kids on the autism spectrum. "Theatre is collaborative at its core," said Pryor. "Many of the same aspects of good theatre are the same skill sets we are seeking to strengthen in our children and (for that matter) ourselves: being present, being available, being specific, creating with others, communicating our feelings and, most importantly, having fun being with each other."

In addition to being a parent of a child with autism, Pryor has created a theatre-based arts curriculum for special needs students at the Pathway School, a private school for learning-disabled children located in Norristown, PA. In 2001, he was awarded an Independence Foundation Fellowship to study with the National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped.

Dr. William O'Flanagan, former president of the Pathway School, saw firsthand the benefit of Pryor's introduction of a drama program at Pathway. "Pete is giving our kids

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the tools to practice social skills and to act in a way that develops their socialization. I have seen an enormous difference in the kids since he has begun working with them," said Dr. O'Flanagan.

(continued on page 2)

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DeLuca met Pryor in 2005, while he was directing Act II's production of the Peter Cook/Dudley Moore comedy vehicle *Good Evening*. In a chance meeting before a rehearsal, Pryor met DeLuca's son, and the connection between the two was immediate – and surprising. “In another conversation, Pete lit up when talking about utilizing drama techniques to reach kids with autism and other learning disabilities,” said DeLuca. “It was obvious that working with these kids was a true passion. At that time, Act II Playhouse had no educational outreach program, so I asked Pete if he would consider working with me to create an autism drama program. He agreed without hesitation.”

Pryor also introduced DeLuca to his wife, Juliette, who is also an actor/teacher and works with therapists to home school the couple's son. Juliette was writing a book on drama games for children with autism. Both moms have training in developmental treatment approaches to build social skills—and utilize similar social and drama techniques on their own sons.

Drama programs do exist for children with autism, but they primarily are designed for the kids with strong language skills. “It's an easy match,” said DeLuca, “because these children already have functional language, so drama helps them take the extra step to hone social skills. What is unique about STAGES is that our program is designed for the entire spectrum of autism, including kids with little or no language. These kids have a special place in our hearts,” added DeLuca. “Because our sons fit more into this category, we have seen how they are often written off because they have low conversational skills. However, we know from experience that these kids are extremely bright and sensitive – and are in fact communicating and interacting in other equally important ways.”

“With STAGES, Pete and I have organized classes into three groups of children, or ‘stages’, based on developmental/diagnosis levels,” said DeLuca. “For the pilot program we have started small, with six students who range in age from 6 to 13. Each works with a trained actor or student. We have been doing a great deal of one-on-one work to get to know the kids better and find a passion that draws them into connecting with us.” The group convenes for an hour and a half, with teachers remaining for another half hour for a wrap-up meeting and to plan activities for the following week.

The STAGES pilot group has been meeting each Saturday since July 5th in classrooms at

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nearby First Presbyterian Church of Ambler, funded by a grant from the Phoebe W. Haas Charitable Trust B. Using established theatre games, music and improvisation techniques, each STAGES class of students will work to create a live theatre presentation. This final performance will incorporate as many in-class activities as possible that are appropriate to performance.

(continued on page 3)

ACT II playhouse

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An integral part of class activities involves music. For this, the STAGES directors rely on Shari Donath, an art and music teacher who works at the Pathway School. "I believe that incorporating music is key to communication," said Donath. "Many of these children have difficulty with the spoken word, but it has been my experience that most children within the autism spectrum open up and delight in the use of music." The children have responded in various ways, including singing karaoke, dancing and playing rhythm sticks to music, and telling "knock knock" jokes.

The final August 9th performance of STAGES will take place on the stage of Act II Playhouse at 11 a.m. The public is invited to attend. Tickets will not be sold but donations will be accepted, with proceeds going back into the program to help raise money for the next STAGES session through Act II, a registered non-profit 501(c)(3) organization. If you cannot attend the performance but would like to contribute, you can donate online at www.act2.org or mail a check, made payable to Act II Playhouse, P.O. Box 555, Ambler, PA 19002-0555. Please specify that you would like the donation to be directed to the STAGES autism drama program.

"There aren't many community-based programs like the one we are running at Act II," said Pete Pryor. "I am very excited about the future of STAGES."