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## **Nibley Children's Theatre celebrating 35 years of performances**



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by [Mitch Henline](#)

NIBLEY – As villains from the past 35 years scheme to take over Nibley, 35 years' worth of heroes will come to the rescue. Spectators will get to watch all the drama unfold for free on the Jessie Datwyler Amphitheater's stage in Anhder Park.

To celebrate the 35th anniversary of the Nibley Children's Theatre, characters from three-and-a-half decades of past performances will be brought back and mixed together in an original production called "Heroes vs Villains: The Battle For Nibley" on Thursday June 15 and Friday June 16 at 7 p.m. Just like every year since 1983, the show will be 100 percent performed by Nibley youth.

That mashup of characters means the Queen of Hearts from "Alice in Wonderland" will be there, and so will Merlin from "The Sword in the Stone". The Wicked Witch of the West from "The Wizard of Oz" will be on stage alongside Mabel from "Pirates of Penzance".

“We even have our Selfish Giant,” said Emily Rigby, this year’s director. “She was from our very first show in 1983.”

Bonnie Schenk-Darrington was a part of that first production when she was 8 years old. She said she grew up with the Nibley Children’s Theatre, made her best friends during rehearsals and helped out in every performance until she graduated high school and moved out of state. She rejoined as a volunteer when she returned to town in 2007.



“It was almost like I picked up right when I left off,” she said. “All of my best friends were in the play when I left. All of my best friends are volunteers in the play now. We have great directors, great people getting involved. It’s incredible, I love it.”

Schenk-Darrington said the theatre has always been available for the kids that don't feel they fit in other places. She once felt like "the awkward kid," that she wasn't good socially or athletically, but knew she found her people when she joined the Children's Theatre.

"We are reaching out to all kids, but especially to those kids that don't feel they fit in anywhere else," she said. "With us they have a voice and a chance to be who they are and not be judged."



The theatre outdates the city's Heritage Days celebration by a couple of years, but now productions are held in conjunction with the annual event. Taking dozens of characters from the past and weaving them into one production has fit that celebration, creating a connection with the city's past and heritage. The girl that played the part of Toto in the 2012 production of "The Wizard of Oz" is now five years older and playing Dorothy. The son of the boy who played an admiral in the 1980s is playing that same character in this year's production.

The children not only act, but they help direct too. They work as stage hands, design the sets, help with music and even produce the program art. Rigby said she tries to "get them involved in all the little things."



“I have one girl that is 13 and she asked me if she could direct a scene,” Rigby said, “so I gave her a scene and I’m letting her have it. That is the fun part of it, these kids are really involved.”

Rigby said it’s always been that way – that ever since Jessie Datwyler started the group it has been about the children. She believes its the reason it has lasted so many years.

“That is really the magic of it,” she said, “that all of these kids from our 5 year olds to our girls and boys who are going to be seniors next year, they’re kind of able to grow up here on this stage and find their special niche, find their voice in the crowd. They get to have their moment on the stage.”

It is a complete community and family effort, Rigby said. Every child that auditions gets a spot, which often means rewriting and adapting the script to create enough parts to accommodate all actors. There is no fee to be a part of the show. Instead, the family of each participating child donates four hours of their time during the two weeks of rehearsal.

“They do everything from keeping the kids organized to costumes,” Rigby said. “We make all of our own costumes.”

The number of participants has grown from around 20 during the first year to more than 180 for the current show, Schenk-Darrington said.

The venue has changed greatly too. There was no amphitheater for the first 19 years; some years there wasn't even a stage. Schenk-Darrington recalled that during some of the earlier years performances took place on the grass, surrounded by farmers' fields. Occasionally a cow would wander too closely behind the performance, interrupting the show with its loud mooing.



The program wasn't always funded either. Each child had to come up with their own costume. Schenk-Darrington recalled her mother creating her costume by bending a coat hanger into the shape of a flower and sewing fabric over it. There is a budget now, and Schenk-Darrington is in charge of obtaining it through grants. She said the organization receives around \$5,000 each year to put on the show and credited Nibley City, the Rocky Mountain Power Foundation and the Cache County RAPZ Tax with large amounts of support.

“Without those guys we'd still be cutting holes in paper sacks to make Indian costumes,” she said.