

for arts sake

The El Dorado Musical Theatre Company produces professional-quality theater. —By Thea Marie Rood

Lightening cracked; thunder boomed. A wind machine howled and blew fog across the stage. Dancers dressed in black swirled long silver ribbons, then ran down the aisles. Dorothy, in her blue plaid dress, hung suspended in the storm, screaming. Miss Gulch flew by, on her angry bicycle; then the Wicked Witch of the West appeared with her broom, in full green-faced glory, cackling wildly.

The second and third grade audience—and their chaperones—sat mesmerized, mouths slightly agape. Now *this* was a field trip.

Best of all, especially for the chaperones, the El Dorado Musical Theatre Company—which presents several shows each year—is local. No driving to San Francisco, not even downtown Sacramento—just Folsom High School. But don't let the suburban setting

fool you: This is big-city entertainment.

"I came in to EDMT as a supportive mom when my daughter got her first part," says Jeanette Caruso, a Serrano resident who is now executive producer. "And I was just so impressed by the high quality of the shows."

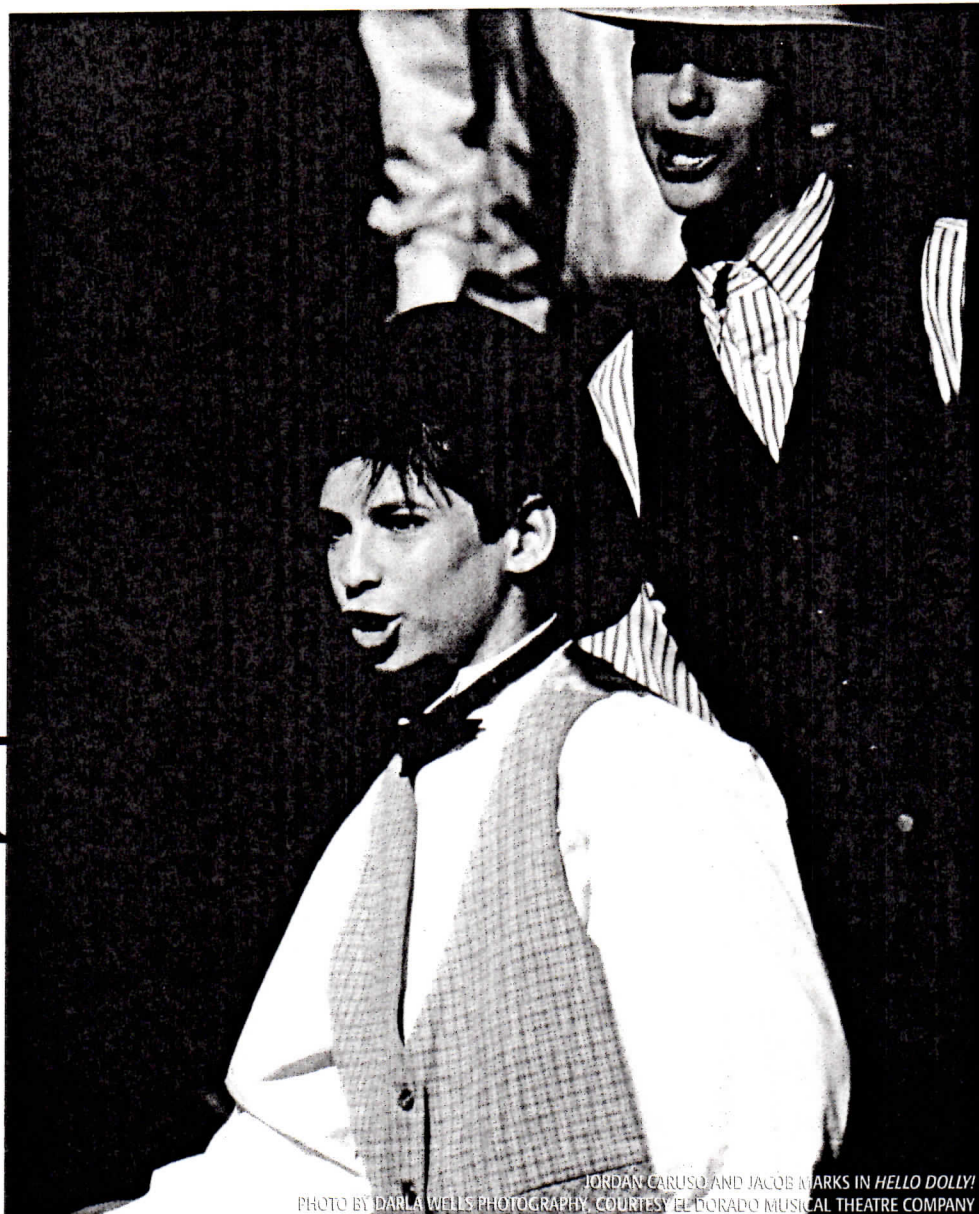
It's true there are no mothers sitting in the lights frantically whispering lines as children bumble around on stage; instead these are stream-lined, professional-level productions. "I never say to myself, 'This is just for kids,'" explains Debbie Wilson-Norris, artistic director and choreographer for the company. "I say, 'This is the show I'm working on'—and I'm always pushing for the highest possible results." How does she get them, you ask, when the casts are filled with hundreds of children, many of whom have no prior show business experience?





SPENCER BORUP, KYLE WELLING AND LAURYN CARUSO IN *THE WIZARD OF OZ*. PHOTO BY DARLA WELLS PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY EL DORADO MUSICAL THEATRE COMPANY

musical theatre
is the
ultimate
team sport.



JORDAN CARUSO AND JACOB MARKS IN HELLO DOLLY!
PHOTO BY DARLA WELLS PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY EL DORADO MUSICAL THEATRE COMPANY

Wilson-Norris laughs her contagious laugh: "If you don't tell them they can't do it, they won't know."

El Dorado Musical Theatre was actually Wilson-Norris' dream, and she founded the company in 2001, shortly after moving to Serrano. "I was involved with the Children's Musical Theatre (CMT) in San Jose, along with my friend John Healy," says Wilson-Norris. "And that company had been around a long time—35 years or so. I also used to teach with Healy at the Performing Arts High School in San Jose. When the Healys moved to El Dorado Hills, so he could take a job [as drama teacher] at Oak Ridge High School, I came along. And when I got here, I started thinking, 'You know, this area really needs something like CMT.' The Healys were willing to help, but Wilson-Norris says

they made it clear from the beginning they could only have limited commitments. (Healy directed the first production, for example.) It was Wilson-Norris' baby, so to speak, but she was undaunted.

This makes sense when you consider the other half of her resume, which she calls her "marching band thing." Wilson-Norris has choreographed half-time and pre-game entertainment at World Cup events in Europe, San Francisco 49er football games, the Superbowl and the Olympics. "She's very modest," says Lynn Cimorelli, vocal director for EDMT. "But she's really one of the best choreographers in the country. She's used to putting on these enormous shows, so she just has a vision when it comes to what the kids are doing on stage."

In fact, compliments boomerang in this theatre company. "We're so lucky with the

people in our lives, in EDMT," says Wilson-Norris. "We have the most incredible people involved, and I'm continually amazed at what the parents will do." Interestingly, none of the adults knew each other prior to the company starting. "EDMT evolved with the kids first, and the parents coming in with them," she says.

One reason parents are willing to build sets, sew costumes, and handle ropes that fly actors across the stage, is the experience is such a good one for their kids. "My daughter had been in two shows, then my son Jordan got his first part in the third show," says Caruso. "He was just sort of trying the whole thing out. And as a parent looking in, [I could see] this was just a huge growth experience for him, to overcome his timidity, his shyness, and get up there on stage. It was funny, because



CHRISTINA CIMORELLI IN *THE WIZARD OF OZ*
 PHOTO BY DARLA WELLS PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY EL DORADO MUSICAL THEATRE COMPANY

he had this little role in *Guys and Dolls* as Lt. Brannigan, and at first he couldn't stop smiling. But he had to be this sort of gruff character."

Wilson-Norris agrees that involvement in the theatre is a natural self-esteem enhancer. "I like to tell the kids, 'You never know how important you are until you're in the wrong place at the wrong time,'" she says with a smile, adding there are no small parts. "Musical theatre is the ultimate team sport."

Cimorelli, who home-schools her children, also says there is no end to educational activities she can tie into the plays. "It really helps us bring literature to life," she says, because the shows are often based on classic books. "We read the entire *Oz* series when they were doing *Wizard of Oz*, for example." She also believes it has offered some invaluable

history lessons. "When they were doing *Annie*, the kids learned about the New Deal, the Depression. And my son Mike played FDR, so we went online and found some clips of Roosevelt talking, so he could get his voice, his way of speaking, to be accurate." Both Lynn and Mike Cimorelli had the chance to play music for one of the company's most unusual shows, *Starmites*, with Lynn on drums and Mike on guitar. "That was cool," he says.

Caruso's three children are not home-schooled, but she believes they too have had their education enhanced by the company. "My children's favorite subject in school is history," she says. "There's almost always some reference to a show." There are also travel tie-ins. "We went to New York, just [my oldest daughter] Lauryn and I, and saw six Broadway musicals," says Caruso.



"Life is an improv," says Debbie Wilson-Norris, artistic director of EDMT. "[Live performance] prepares you for that." Because of course you never know what's going to happen out on that stage, no matter how many times you rehearse.

What's gone wrong during performances? Stories abound, all told with good humor, if not downright glee, and the EDMT adults say they are most amazed at how gracefully the kid actors handle mishaps. "Generally, it doesn't faze them," says Lynn Cimorelli, the company's vocal director and mother of seven of the company's performers. "Where an adult might freeze, they just sort of keep going."

With so many Cimorellis in each production, it's not surprising they're able to offer up a rich assortment of goofs. "During *Wizard of Oz*, Toto ran away—like from the house where he was staying," recounts 9-year-old Amy Cimorelli with a grin. "So for the last show, we had to use a different dog, and he was mean—he even growled at Dorothy." Eleven-year-old Lisa remembers getting her hair stuck to another actor's while they were singing a duet in *Aladdin*; 15-year-old Mike, who played FDR in *Annie*, caught his prop wheelchair in the curtains; and 6-year-old Lauren often loses a shoe on stage.

What else? "Well, let's see, in *Li'l Abner*, Daisy's costume kept falling off," laughs Wilson-Norris. And executive producer Jeanette Caruso, who has two children in the company, adds: "In *Aladdin*, there was one show where a little boy forgot his line. There was dead silence up there for a few seconds until someone thought of something to say. Also, my son Jordan played *Aladdin*, and Lisa Cimorelli was Jasmine—and when they were supposed to hold hands, you know, look loving, she'd pinch him." ■

ABOVE: DEBBIE WILSON-NORRIS—INSTRUCTING THE CAST OF *SCHOOLHOUSE ROCK LIVE, JR.*, PHOTO BY DARLA WELLS PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY EL DORADO MUSICAL THEATRE COMPANY



lauryn caruso

Although you couldn't miss 14-year-old Lauryn Caruso in EDMT's *Wizard of Oz* last fall (she was Dorothy), you probably wouldn't recognize her sitting in Freshman English at Oak Ridge High School. "She has a very mature stage presence—and singing voice," says her mother, Jeanette Caruso. "Most people think she's 18 when they see her perform."

How did Lauryn prepare for such a well-loved and familiar role? "She watched the movie a bit, of course," says Caruso. But Lauryn adds with a grin, "Then I made it my own."

In fact, Lauryn is one of several rising young stars in the company, winning the 2003-2004 Elly award for her part in *Starmites*, a unique—and demanding—dual role that required her to play Eleanor, a self-confident, super-hero Earth girl, and Bizarbara, an insecure and nervous space alien that picked her teeth with her finger.

Despite her obvious dramatic talent, however, Lauryn came to theatre later than some of her peers at EDMT. "She was 11 when she landed her first role—as the princess in *Frog Prince*," says Caruso. "Before that, she'd taken a drama class, been in some skits at church. We heard about the audition for the EDMT show, thought we'd give it a try—and the rest is history. We had no idea at the time this would become such a big part of our lives."

Lauryn, in fact, gave up swimming and softball to more fully concentrate on what has become her "passion." "She has an acting coach now, takes voice and dance," says Caruso. "It's all she does." Lauryn has also been reunited with her *Frog Prince* director, John Healy—he's now her drama teacher at the high school. She also appeared as Fantine in *Les Miserables* at Oak Ridge in March.

Lauryn's passion for the theatre has drawn in 12-year-old brother, Jordan, and 11-year-old sister, Teryn, (both of whom are members of EDMT), her mom (who's now the executive producer) and most recently her dad (who worked the ropes that flew actors across the stage in *Wizard of Oz*). "Now he's hooked," she says. And how will the family react the day she wants to move to New York to land a spot on Broadway? "I'll just want to go with her," says her mother with a laugh. ■

LAURYN CARUSO IN *THE WIZARD OF OZ*, PHOTO BY DARLA WELLS PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF EL DORADO MUSICAL THEATRE COMPANY



KARLY KETELLE AND ANJIE NORRIS IN *THE WIZARD OF OZ* PHOTO BY DARLA WELLS PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY EL DORADO MUSICAL THEATRE COMPANY

"Now we can't wait to go back—we want to see *Wicked*."

But perhaps the best added bonus to being a member of the company is the friendship. "It's awesome that the kids get to know kids from other schools and at other grade levels," says Caruso. "When Lauryn moved to the high school this fall, for example, she already knew so many people, all the drama kids. It was such an easy transition." Back to Wilson-Norris' team analogy, there also seems to be a deeper bond between kids who put on shows together. "They really help one another on stage," says Wilson-Norris. Caruso agrees: "It's nice to see the older ones take the younger ones under their wing. I really think they're closer to their friends from the theatre than they are with the kids from school." And the kids' take? "There just

doesn't seem to be even one mean kid in the company," says 14-year-old Christina Cimorelli, and her brothers and sisters say they've made "tons of friends."

The company initially was a small one, moving from school to school for rehearsals, putting on shows at the Oak Ridge High School auditorium. "We had to bring in storage bins to use as dressing rooms," laughs Caruso. But today, it's growing by leaps and bounds. "We have to turn kids away at every audition," says Caruso, adding the company now attracts children not only outside of Serrano and El Dorado Hills, but as far away as Elk Grove. Securing Folsom High School for performances, which seats 600 people and has adequate backstage facilities, has also been a coup, though it's also more expensive. "I have to get a few more sponsors," admits Caruso, "be a little



JORDAN SHARP, TERYN CARUSO AND STEFANIE POLIVKA IN *SCHOOLHOUSE ROCK LIVE, JR.*
PHOTO BY DARLA WELLS PHOTOGRAPHY, COURTESY EL DORADO MUSICAL THEATRE COMPANY

everyone gets
a **part,**
everyone gets
a **line.**

more creative with the budget."

There are, however, some advantages to growing up. EDMT now has a permanent home in the El Dorado Hills business park, where it recently opened its own Performing Arts Institute, offering dance, voice and acting classes. Rehearsals are also held there, as well as auditions.

What do auditions consist of? Depends on the type of show. "We have training shows for 5- to 9-year-olds," says Caruso, who adds that these present the perfect opportunity to "get a taste" of EDMT. "Everyone gets a part, everyone gets a line." Potential actors have to register, then sing a song. (The company's most recent training show, performed twice in March, *The Greatest Race*, is the first in-house play done at EDMT. The writer was Wilson-Norris' brother, Rick Wilson.)

For the company's regular shows, open to children over the age of 8, there are slightly more strenuous auditions. "They sing a song, then come up in groups of 10 to dance," says Cimorelli. "Debbie [Wilson-Norris] teaches them a dance, then watches them move." Just like in real show business, kids they're interested in get a "call-back." "They're often asked to read for a specific part at that time," says Cimorelli. Any advice for getting through the audition? "Do your best," says 6-year-old Lauren Cimorelli.

There certainly seems to be no shortage of talent showing up for EDMT auditions. "I always say the Cimorellis come out of a room together singing in harmony," laughs Wilson-Norris of the large and von Trapp-esque Serrano family. "But the thing is, there are lots and lots of kids like

them that just keep coming along." In fact, Wilson-Norris' own children—8-year-old Anjie and 5-year-old Zach—are interested in show business as well. "Zach attends more rehearsals than some of the kids in the show," she says. "And he'll come home saying, 'He didn't say that line right.' Anjie started [with the company] right after her sixth birthday, and now she tells people she wants 'Mommy's job' when she grows up."

Even if you're not ready to jump on the stage and start performing, there is one role that's easy—being an audience member. The company's next performance is *Anything Goes*, with music by Cole Porter performed by a live band. It runs April 28 through May 7 at Folsom High School. (Contact 941-SING for more information.)