

# Kids Find Community and Confidence at Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre

## Meet Director Aleksa Shermack



By Janine Chiasson

Aleksa Shermack's life is completely focused on the arts as a participant, director, facilitator, mentor, you name it. A few years ago, when she and her sister saw that many kids didn't have the means to try all the things they might like, "we started an arts collective with programming that incorporated media, acting, dancing, and singing so kids could get a bit of experience and figure out what they love," Aleksa recounts. "When Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre heard about this new model, they asked us to bring our methodology to their organization." It's been a big hit.

For the first few years they chose shows that people were familiar with The Wizard of Oz, Alice in Wonderland, The Jungle Book but always with a unique cast-driven twist. "We start by getting the kids' ideas, their feedback on the story, and how the play might be adapted to include their special talents," Aleksa explains.

In the end everyone gets a role, but an open audition process lets everyone watch and participate and get comfortable with each other. "That very first day," Aleksa says, "they create an amazing ensemble where they're supporting each other and realize that this is a safe environment – it's like a family. Kids are inspired by just being allowed to try something. Some of our kids who were not confident singers but really wanted to do it, are now playing instruments and singing in public."



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Aleksa credits the entire Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre team for working tirelessly behind the scenes to make her and the kids' conceptions reality. But the true work of Eleanor Drury, Aleksa emphasizes, is to make participants "feel they have a place where they're comfortable being their best self. Maybe some, or a lot of these kids, don't have that place at school or in the social group they're meeting every day, but when they come here, I don't see anything of the shy person they tell me they are in the rest of their lives."

As a child, Aleksa Shermack remembers attending Eleanor Drury plays with her class. Now she's proud to be part of the Eleanor Drury legacy 40 years of children on stage. "Even if kids don't continue in theatre," she says, "the confidence they build, the ability to work with different kinds of people, the ability to overcome adversity, to be adaptable, to understand that things go wrong and that's OK, is lasting. The best way to learn is through trying."

When the curtain goes up, adults step away and the kids run the show. "This group of youth performers – some of them for the first time on stage are like professionals," Aleksa boasts. "I'm so proud of them."

Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre is a charitable not-for-profit managing to stage incredible, accessible shows on a shoestring budget. "Initiatives like Tbaytel For Good help us share children's theatre with as many people as possible," Aleksa says. "Thank goodness for corporations like Tbaytel who invest in local programs that nurture creativity, participation and a sense of community in children."



### EDCT Goes Virtual During COVID

Based on an Oscar Wilde theme, 2020 first-term programming saw cast members exploring verbatim theatre, filming skits, and developing monologues. Starting in January 2021, kids will explore acting for film; music and movement; and visual production techniques like puppetry and claymation; culminating in an online *Wilde Life* performance, to be staged in person when COVID status allows.

### Support Youth Live Theatre!

EDCT is a registered Canadian charity bringing accessible live theatre to children and youth in Thunder Bay. Interested sponsors are encouraged to contact EDCT directly (details on Facebook); everyone can make online donations through [CanadaHelps.org](https://CanadaHelps.org).

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