

Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre – Challenging, Welcoming, and Fun

Meet Actor Sarah Hughes



By Janine Chiasson

She was one of the first Eleanor Drury Munchkins, brought flair to *Cinderella's* fashion fairy godmother, portrayed a muse in *The Odyssey*, and added many more roles through her eight years with Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre; now actor Sarah Hughes has a repertoire that's pretty astounding considering she's in Grade 12 at St Ignatius High School.

Like other participants, Sarah loves how Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre (EDCT) lets the cast and crew take over right from the start. "In the summer, we meet to go over the script and make modifications," she explains, "then we put our own twist on every show to make it our own. It's tailored just to us – not to anyone else."

One year, this resulted in a modern themed *Cinderella*. "I was a fashion godmother with my own talk show and our director, Aleksa Shermack, photoshopped me onto the set of Ellen and I started dancing on a trampoline in slow motion," Sarah recounts. "It was crazy." And last year, the EDCT crew managed to condense *The Odyssey* into just over an hour while lowering the "gory scale" as Sarah puts it. "The actual play would not be at all suitable for children. We changed the original play's cannibals into Nonnas who feed their victims food laden with poison, stuff them into a giant pierogi, and then eat them." Delicious.



For the first couple of gatherings in the fall, the cast and crew meet, get to know each other, then participate in auditions where directors see what the kids can do. At this point, EDCT has a unique and positive approach, "There is no cap," Sarah emphasizes. "We have roles for everyone, or if we don't, we make roles." New parts are added, scenes changed or deleted, sets imagined and reimagined, costumes envisioned – all based on children's input. Everything comes together because, as Sarah states, "We all help each other. Lots of parent volunteers rally our young children so nothing goes too ballistic. Backstage and onstage, we're all just one big family."

Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre is an amazing opportunity for children to come together from across and outside the city to make lifelong friendships and learn about all aspects of theatre. Sarah talks about her start at age nine when she got on stage with no idea what she was doing. But over the years she says, "my knowledge grew of the stage, how backstage works, and how set design works – which is like an insane process – and the struggle of learning lines when they keep increasing. But it's all worth it once you get on stage."

For Sarah, her personal growth happens because the EDCT family encourages and accepts everyone – newcomers included. "I would be so different if I didn't do theatre," Sarah shares. "I've become so much more confident speaking in front of people. On stage, playing all these roles, many aspects of yourself and your fellow cast are revealed. Theatre breaks people out of their shell."

Sarah and the rest of the crew are thankful for sponsors like Tbaytel who support Eleanor Drury Children's Theatre and keep their stage alive. "Even though you can act for yourself – like singing in the shower or putting on concerts for a pretend audience," Sarah says, "even if it's a small audience, even two people, you know someone is enjoying it with you."

When asked if she'll keep doing theatre, Sarah replies without a shred of hesitation, "Oh, for sure. Until I'm too old to do it. Never."



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.

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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.

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