



60 seconds with Ellen Schlaefer '78

Imagination: Use It or Lose It

Ellen Schlaefer '78 majored in English with an Honors College (now the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies) self-study thesis in theatre—which she revels in pronouncing “thee-yater,” in her well-steeped South Carolina accent. At home again in Chapin, S.C., as primary caretaker for her elderly mother, Ellen took a few moments away from her arts-grant-writing computer screen in early November to reflect on her MFA in directing from The Catholic University of America, her subsequent 23 years and counting as a national freelance stage director and stage manager, and most importantly, the evolution of her “little ol’ company” Opera For Kids, which she founded in 1995. (www.operaforkids.com).



DJ: What have you been doing since you were in Charlotte last year working for the world premiere production of the opera *Cold Sassy Tree*?

ES: *The most recent thing I did was assistant-directing The Little Prince, an opera with music written by Rachel Portman. It was broadcast on NPR last Saturday.*

DJ: What’s up at Opera For Kids?

ES: *At last count, we’ve played to over 120,000 students, fulfilling part of our mission to help teachers mold creative thinkers. Part of our vision is to incorporate the arts so they are not at odds in a technological age, but so that the arts will benefit business. All the studies show that students who are exposed to the arts read better and speak better and think better—and play well with others! Businesses are starting to understand that the arts are a valid part of workforce preparation.*

DJ: How did Opera For Kids get started?

ES: *Watching Connie Welsh and the Tarradiddle Players while I was at Davidson; it was an idea that I thought was fascinating 30 years ago, taking the arts into the schools and sharing a live performing experience.*

DJ: Producing the Three Little Pigs and Goldilocks with the Augusta Symphony Orchestra, as you did recently, sounds like a real hoot. You once said, “There’s no tougher audience than a bunch of third-graders.” What is your favorite part of such an experience?

ES: *Watching children walk into a room with a set of expectations of what they perceive to be opera, and inside of a minute they’re enthralled, with a rapt attention that you usually don’t see unless it’s some pee-wee show. It’s the proximity of a live show, there’s usually no orchestra pit. ...*

DJ: What are your goals for the future?

ES: *(laughing) To get a living wage. ... And, I want us to be able to produce full-length operas using children as performers, works like Britten’s Noye’s Fludd, Brundibar by Hans Krasa. My biggest business goal is to be able to offer performances that are sponsored by corporations, so we don’t have to keep tapping already-strained art budgets. ... One child at a time, we are just trying to open up imagination, before we lose it.*



2399, or email maross@davidson.edu. ♦ **Congratulations** to Kevin Hanna '81, incoming Davidson College