

**C**atch a play in the wine country these days, and chances are it was touched in some way by 29-year-old Jonathen Blue—a jack of all theater trades currently making the rounds between playhouses and drama classrooms across Sonoma and Napa counties.

Blue's day job is to run the kids' program for the 6th Street Playhouse in downtown Santa Rosa, where enrollment has surpassed pre-Covid levels to reach around 500 kids per year. The program is now so popular that "we have waiting lists for every new show," according to Emily Lynn Cornelius, executive director of 6th Street. Tickets for the shows that kids perform at the end of each session—like *Matilda The Musical Jr.* this May—have begun selling out as well.

Blue likewise has his fingers in all aspects of production for the professional adult plays at 6th Street, according to his boss. Script selection, choreography, costumes, wigs, makeup, set design, stage lights, sound—the works. He even "stays here overnight to paint the stage," Cornelius said. She called Blue "the very reason we have had a successful season."

Cornelius remembered one particularly epic save in winter. "I called him with an hour to spare for a performance of *Fences* a few months ago," she said. "Our actor was out, our understudy's car was broken down and we had no other option but to cancel unless he could step in. He did not hesitate to accept the challenge and save the performance—memorizing lines in the background and performing a pivotal role with grace and style."

Blue was also in charge of hair and makeup for *Fences*. Now, for the run of *Kinky Boots* coming up at 6th Street in June, he's overseeing hair and makeup again, plus costume design—a "huge

**DRAMA KID** There's no theater job too small—or big—for Jonathen Blue, director of education and community engagement for Santa Rosa's popping 6th Street Playhouse.

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task," Cornelius said, "since this show has over three times the number of costumes, hair and makeup than anything else we have produced this season." Blue stars in the play, too, as lead drag queen Lola.

At *Kinky Boots* rehearsals, during downtime between scenes, Blue said he can be found backstage, "sewing some costumes together or building a boot or something like that."

In his words: "I'm just a busybody with a dream."

That dream keeps getting bigger. This year, on top of everything, Blue has begun writing plays for the 6th Street kids' program himself—an attempt to air perspectives he believes are missing from other scripts on the market. Blue's new jam, *Holly Day and the Rainbow Road*, is about emotional health, told through the story of "a girl giving her colors away, and figuring out what color really fits for her," he said. And his ambitious twist on *Alice in Wonderland* is a musical in which each song belongs to a different genre.

Blue is now teaching "large groups of kids to sing difficult rhythms and harmonies," according to Cornelius. She has been blown away by his "commitment to the successful training of the next generation of artists."

Outside 6th Street, Blue works both onstage and behind the scenes for other theater troupes and stages like the ones

at Napa Valley College, Sonoma Arts Live and Left Edge Theater.

Cornelius called him "a foundational support system for other theaters and our large community of actors" in the greater area. For example, she said, "a recent opening weekend at another local theater had quite a few sick actors, and he spent his free time making them special vocal support tonics."

At the end of the day, Blue said the best part of his job is watching young thespians-in-training find a pathway to the heart of the character they're portraying—and, in the process, deepen their sense of empathy toward themselves and others.

"Sometimes it's as small as changing a pair of shoes," he said. "The student will put on a new pair of shoes for their character and be like, 'Oh, yeah. Now I feel like I'm this person.' Then they realize, 'Oh, I don't have to stay in the same old things that I don't like. I can make changes in my life.'"

He added: "Theater really exposes the human condition. That's what it boils down to. I've found that trying to bring other people's stories to life has made me more empathetic to people who are not necessarily like me. We're really just trying to teach the kids what it means to be a person and be tolerant of other people." 🌻

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