

Beyond the stage, and beyond the boundaries that often define opera companies, Lyric is igniting creativity across Chicago. Through innovative learning opportunities, creative exploration, and artistic creation and collaboration, Lyric, with your support, encourages students, educators, families, audiences, and Chicagoans from neighborhoods across the city to share their voices and embrace the power and relevance of opera as a catalyst for growth and change.



Jaelyn Simpson Photography

Teaching artist Paige Dirkes-Jacks working with students at Solomon Elementary during an Elementary Opera Residency session.

Lyric

Beyond the stage

Good Grades

Lyric's Elementary Opera Residency program brings the art form to life in unexpected places

By Graham Meyer

The scene: In a garden behind a Chicago elementary school, a fifth-grader is doing bicep curls. Another kid enters, yelling, "That's it, Curtis! We're done! I'm not your girlfriend anymore!" An ensemble of kids then fills the courtyard stage to sing, "I can buy myself flowers / Write my name in the sand."

It's a brand-new, one-time-only operatic version of *Seedfolks*, a book by Paul Fleischman about a diverse neighborhood working together to build a community garden. A class at Solomon Elementary School in the city's North Park neighborhood put the show together through Lyric's Elementary Opera Residency, a program pairing classes of first- through fifth-graders with teaching artists, to guide the students in the creation

and performance of original shows. The program, an initiative of Lyric Unlimited, the company's Learning and Creative Engagement department, opens up the art form of opera to the kids, who otherwise might not have much exposure to it—and provides them a space to cultivate creative ideas together and step out as performers.

Paige Dirkes-Jacks is a teaching artist with Lyric. A recent graduate of Northwestern University with a vocal performance degree, Dirkes-Jacks has also directed storefront opera projects such as *La Femme Bohème*, an all-female/nonbinary version of the Puccini classic put on by Ouroboros Opera and The Valkyrie Ensemble. In the Elementary Opera Residency program, she has shepherded five different classrooms through casting and staging ideas,



Dirkes-Jacks confers with a student performer during a visit as part of Lyric's Elementary Opera Residency Program.

Jaclyn Simpson Photography

Teacher Jeanne Bakula with fifth grade students at Solomon Elementary.

writing a libretto, and selecting music for their original productions, and she has several more still to come this year. Each residency consists of 13 or 18 weekly visits, the second-to-last of which is the performance, with parents, caregivers, and other students as the audience. The final meeting provides an opportunity for reflection.

Seedfolks, a book with an episodic narrative and plenty of characters to accommodate a whole class of children, was the first Lyric residency project in Jeanne Bakula's fifth-grade classroom. This year, Bakula's class is adapting *The Phantom Tollbooth*, the fantastical 1961 novel by Norton Juster, full of wordplay and ticklish pseudologic. They might even create their own new scenes in the style of *The Phantom Tollbooth*, if they feel inspired to. "It's a book that lends itself really well to devising," Dirkes-Jacks says.

Bakula's current fifth-graders, who attended the *Seedfolks* performance as fourth-graders, are brimming with ideas for the show, such as how to stage the tiny, listless people called the Lethargians, and who will get to build the main character's car. The students don't all have copies of the book, so they are listening to a read-aloud version with the text and illustrations projected in the classroom. "If you could see them all huddled around the screen to read the book, and counting down the minutes until they get to see Paige again," Bakula says.

Each project's music befits the source material. For *Seedfolks*, a contemporary story, Dirkes-Jacks and the students chose pop music of recent vintage, like the Miley Cyrus song "Flowers" for the dramatic breakup moment. They plan a mixture for *The Phantom Tollbooth*, maybe some pop, maybe some folk songs, and maybe an adaptation of "Rock-a-bye Baby" with lyrics rewritten for when the Lethargians fall asleep.

"My goal is to come into a school and bring opera to an accessible level, because all opera is storytelling through music, and that's for everyone," Dirkes-Jacks says. Opera, in people's minds, is freighted with all kinds of preconceptions; seeing Dirkes-Jacks, one of Bakula's colleagues at Solomon couldn't believe she was really



Jacklyn Simpson Photography

an opera singer, walking around with no breastplate or Viking helmet. "I swear he thought she would have those braids," Bakula says.

"We have a lot of assumptions about what opera has to look like and sound like and be," Dirkes-Jacks says, "and those assumptions come from very real places and very real exclusions that have happened for hundreds of years." Inclusion and even unusual locations can combat those assumptions at both the individual and community levels. One recent immigrant student, very shy, felt moved to sing a Russian song after Dirkes-Jacks sang "Voi che sapete" from *The Marriage of Figaro* for the class. Another child with troubles, often a source of tension in the school, found a moment of remove just noodling on the keyboard from time to time during rehearsals.

Dirkes-Jacks says that part of the message is to show entire communities that they, too, can participate in this art form—that opera entails less pomp than they might think. "It doesn't have to happen in a giant hall with red velvet curtains and ushers and golden chandeliers," she says. "It can happen in a community garden. It can happen in a gymnasium. It can happen in a classroom. And it's still opera, and it's still powerful." 