



NICHOLE CHRISTIAN/Detroit Free Press

Karen DiChiera, community arts director for the Detroit Opera House, coaches fourth-grade students at Hanstein Elementary School in Detroit. The students wrote and will perform on May 9 an opera entitled "The Ringer of the Moon."

Bravo to young creators and performers of opera

I don't have the credentials to judge opera. But I know joy. And achievement. And creativity. And enthusiasm.

I saw it all at a recent opera rehearsal that just reinforces what I also know: The arts must be preserved as more than an underfunded afterthought in public education.

Talk to one of the production's stars, Micha Grier, who is 9, and you instantly wish there was a way to clone her experience to classrooms all over the state where financial pressures and testing pressures may be stifling creativity and life-changing learning.

Micha and her fourth-grade classmates at Hanstein Elementary on Detroit's far east side are heading next month to a small stage at the Detroit Opera House to star in the first ever production of "The Ringer of the Moon," a medieval tale about the power of words and imagination. If the title doesn't ring a bell with opera fans, it's because this one was written, start to finish, by the kids.

They aren't budding Puccinis or Jesse Normans yet. But they are luckier than they know, and not just because they'll perform in a space reserved for big-voiced giants. Their good fortune is in simply attending a school that can afford to value and invest in arts as a logical extension of everyday learning.

Hanstein is one of 26 Detroit schools that contract with the Inside Out Literary Arts Project, a nationally lauded group that places professional writers in residences for an entire school year. Lucky for Micha, Hanstein was also tapped as the site of its boldest experiment yet: a pilot project to turn children's poems into a children's opera.

Since December, Karen DiChiera, community arts director of the Detroit Opera House, has been volunteering with Inside Out education director Suzanne Scarfone to coach students on opera vocabulary, their roles as knights and courtiers, as well as staging, posture, voice projection, story and dialogue development.

"It's not just that we're teaching them



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to compose and understand opera," says Scarfone. "We're engaging analytical skills. To develop a plot, a premise, they had to think through a storyline. Social skills are strengthened, too. One of the biggest things they've had to learn is poise; it's very hard unless you've been exposed to sitting, waiting, listening."

Micha and her mother, who regularly attends rehearsals in the school's basement gym, couldn't be more thrilled: "I wrote a song," Micha beamed to me recently, "and I like that I can sing in front of people now."

Mom Tanya says: "You could not have told me six months ago that Micha would be doing this. She was so shy, but now she's actually digging around on her own looking for opera stars to learn about."

That's the power of arts exposure; give children an opportunity and they'll try amazing things.

The students will show off "The Ringer of the Moon" on May 9 before a crowd of mostly parents, school staff and students. If the energy and confidence I saw in the students are any gauge, DPS would be wise to expand Inside Out as far as it can afford before another artistically hungry school district grabs up the program.

"When the opera lady told us we could make opera, I didn't know about it that much," Micha said. "But it's fun doing something you don't think you can. It makes me believe I can try hard."

You don't have to love the arts to love an impact like that.

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