

Thinking Big - and Delivering

# James & the Giant Peach



James and bugs "on top" of the peach

Led by NCS theater director Ryan Joyce and set designer Larry Robjent, last spring's production of *James and the Giant Peach* was a smashing success, setting some impressive milestones along the way. The show featured the largest cast in recent memory, 47 actors strong, plus a 15-member stage crew. Fully 100 percent of the student body participated in the construction of the set. At 14-feet high, the paper maché and welded steel peach that accommodated James and his seven traveling insect companions took on a leading role. The projection of digital images, a student-made video, and stunning costuming and make-up rounded out what Lake Placid Center for the Arts director Matt Sorensen praised as a "magnificent job... imaginative and innovative."

The success of "Peach" has inspired Ryan to plan several additional public performances this year. On October 24, students will present an adaptation of Chris Van Allsburg's *Just A Dream*, whose environmental theme coincides with activist Bill McKibben's International Day of Climate Action. During the Thanksgiving festivities, Level IV and V drama students will perform for visiting parents and families a series of dramatic sketches by cartoonist Jules Feiffer that feature coming of age material to highlight their acting skills.

This year's spring production will be another large-scale, blockbuster of a show: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, based on an original script adapted by Ryan from the Lewis Carroll novel. The choice appealed instantly to both Ryan and Larry.

"I'm attracted to plays with big sets," said Larry.

"And I'm attracted to theater with a slightly skewed message—not everyone always living happily ever after," added Ryan. "I have no interest in dumbing things down because we're working with middle schoolers. So many junior high productions sanitize everything objectionable. What I like here is that we have the freedom to try things that are not easy—the back story in *Peach* about James' abusive aunts, for instance."

"*Alice in Wonderland* has some similar quasi-adult themes—what's real, what's fake. I'll be interested to see how you pull it off," said Larry.

"And I'm interested in seeing what the stage will look like when Alice is big," countered Ryan.

Last year's experience with the peach should be instructive. Like



Alice, it grew to its full size in front of the audience, with both the inside and the outside visible to the crowd. In addition, the large set pieces had to be made in modules, with component parts made in Flushing Meadow then moved to and re-assembled in the Quonset. “Making the peach was tricky,” acknowledged Larry. “A lot of engineering went into that design.”

The interior platforms had to be weight bearing, for instance, able to support the insects at different levels within the peach. Rolling scaffolding attached to the back of the half orb allowed the bugs to appear on top of the peach from the audience’s view; when the scaffolding was detached, the peach could spin around allowing the audience to see its inside.

Larry also noted that 90 to 95 percent of the set was made from recycled or reused materials. For the peach, only the paint and the newspaper for the paper maché was new. The same is true for the costumes: “We don’t go out and buy them,” said Ryan. Rather, a talented group of faculty—led by Liz Jordan, Colette Wilson, Hannah Mensing, Katie Culpepper, and Treetops counselor Anna Mould—makes them from scratch, with assistance from students. “I’ll always remember [then Level IV student] Alex Peng meticulously sewing the ladybug costume piece by piece,” Ryan said.

Larry summed up the NCS way: “This is our stuff. How are we going to create what we need?”

The lack of a bona fide theater or auditorium necessitates this kind of problem solving approach; it also requires a large dose of community support. Almost every room in the main building is enlisted in the cause: the dining room is used as a green room, the staff room as a staging area, the music room for large props, the Level I and II rooms for changing. Virtually the entire faculty was involved in some aspect of the *Peach* production. Mike Tholen’s talent with paint was evident on the peach and other set pieces. Todd Pinsonneault led the student crew that made the video of the peach rolling down hill and contributed additional technical expertise. John Doan wrote and performed an original song for the show with a group of student musicians. Others manned stage entrances, worked on the program, did makeup and costume changes.



Peering out the back



Maneuvering the 14-foot peach

Said Ryan, “What makes our program so unique is that it’s a full community effort. There’s a part for everybody here—faculty and students alike.”

As a result of their broad involvement, NCS students leave here with a broad range of theater skills—from acting and playwriting to set design and construction, lighting and sound engineering. “We teach a professionalism that’s rare for a middle school program,” said Larry. “For *Peach*, I was out of the booth during the performances. The light board, sound, video

all were run by students. I was just another grunt down on the floor, with Kyle [Curry NCS 09] telling me what to do.”

Another consequence, Ryan pointed out, is that the NCS theater program has begun to make a name for itself beyond our School and Camp community. He noted the packed crowd for last spring’s public performance—people stood in the back row of the Quonset throughout the two-hour show. In addition, LPCA director Matt Sorensen was so impressed with the *Peach* production that he later sought out Ryan for ways to collaborate.

One immediate result is Ryan’s directing a co-production with the LPCA of a ten-year retrospective, *The Laramie Project Epilogue*, based on the 1998 murder of Wyoming college student Matthew Shepard—a tragedy that sparked national outrage and federal hate-crimes legislation. The October 12, 2009 performance at the LPCA was one of 130 premiers opening simultaneously across the country, preceded by a live webcast from Lincoln Center in New York of director Moises Kaufman and his original cast introducing the plays. Ryan took Level IV and V students to see the production in Lake Placid.

If Ryan aims to take NCS theater to a broader audience, the reciprocal is true as well. “I do want to introduce our kids to a larger world beyond our small community,” he said. “There’s so much for them to learn and to experience. Exposing them to new ideas also provides an opportunity for them to find their own ways to contribute.”

“When you give kids the knowledge base, support them enough, and empower them to take ownership, that’s what it’s all about,” said Larry. “You just wind them up and let them go.” 🌱

**Please note:** You can watch a video of last spring’s production of *James and the Giant Peach* on our website (<http://www.nct.org>). Stay tuned for updates and photos from the theater department at [www.nct.org/theater](http://www.nct.org/theater).

