Kids write the darndest things for ‘That’s Weird, Grandma,’ a show that opens an unexpected window into their minds

By Christopher Borrelli
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There are moments during “That’s Weird, Grandma,” which has stayed quiet and wonderful on the North Side for eight years, when you feel horrible for the performers — and worse for the children who write the show. You feel bad because “That’s Weird, Grandma” is a Monday night show. Monday nights are rough. Some weeks, performers face a full house. Other weeks, there are more actors onstage than in the audience. But “That’s Weird, Grandma” has been a Monday staple since 2001, when it opened at the Neo-Futurarium, home of the even more unkillable “Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind.”

Mondays, it stays.

Which is why it pains to say, if you have never heard of “That’s Weird, Grandma,” and possibly you haven’t, you will have to trek up those creaky wooden stairs at the corner of Ashland and Foster on a school night. Because, for sheer tenacity, it demands respect. And because, gosh, it’s for the kids! The actors explain this, early on, swooning as they launch into a song and dance: We teach Chicago school kids! They write us stories! Now we’re here! To perform those very words!

After which, if you have ever heard a child tell a story, without structure or punctuation, if you have ever listened to that charming stream of consciousness and traced its looping trajectory, the rest makes sense. “That’s Weird, Grandma” is an assemblage of random thoughts and concerns of Chicago children, sculpted into theater, but so respectful of how kids think, it sidesteps “Kids-Say-the-Darndest-Things” syndrome, veering into lunacy, social criticism, even poignancy. The theater company that does the sculpting is called Barrel of Monkeys. It has two jobs: 1. Teach writing workshops in Chicago public schools; and 2. take the material from those workshops and, without sacrificing a single word written by the children, create a series of short plays to be performed in “That’s Weird, Grand-...
Performers rehearse for "That's Weird, Grandma."
TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/
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ma.”

Consider this, sung by an adolescent German chanteuse (actress Laura Grey): “One day I was playing video games / I went to the moon with my friends / My friends came to my grandmother’s house / My favorite color is pink / I like to eat chicken.” Those are the words of a second-grader named Desiree, enrolled in a Rogers Park writing program. Translated by Barrel of Monkeys, however, with accompaniment from a My First Sony keyboard, it becomes a kind of perverse Kraftwerk B-side.

“Over the years, I think the show has become like a Pixar movie,” said Greg, who has been with Barrel of Monkeys since 2003. “It’s subversive and ironic but transcends age, which is one reason it’s not as well known as it could be. People see it as children’s theater. Which it is, but not really. Adults would appreciate it. It’s a marketing problem. I can’t even explain it.”

How does one explain a show that seems to understand intuitively the pandering and exhausting tendencies of children’s entertainment, and comments without sacrificing the innocence we associate with children’s entertainment? For instance, “The Magical Place,” written by a fourth-grader named Dulce in the Columbia Explorers Academy: A young girl discovers a Magical Place in a McDonald’s where there are free Barbies and shoes. The girl (a 20-something actress) has wide eyes of wonder, but once she passes into the Magical Place (by walking through a curtain strung across the stage), a pair of actors leap out:

“Magical place! Stay here forever! Magical place! Stay here forever! Magical place!”

The actress smiles weakly.

“Magical place! Stay here forever!” Her smile dims.

“Magical place! Stay here forever!” Her smile fades.

“Magical place! Stay here forever!” She begins to cry.

A metaphor for children’s entertainment? For the soulless joy machine, as artistic director Luke Hatton put it, “that passes as entertainment then becomes painful”?

“I wouldn’t say any of us are doing this in reaction to a particular children’s entertainment aesthetic,” said Jason Sperling, a longtime company member. “We just respect children. They don’t have the life experience you connect with great art, but they are complex. Performing their work can be affirming for them. As a group, though, we have developed an aversion to the ‘Hello, Mr. Bear’ school of kid’s entertainment. But then, so have the children.”

For sure, there’s nothing like this in children’s theater, said Jacqueline Russell, artistic director of the Chicago Children’s Theatre. “Not in Chicago, there isn’t. The performers are engaged on the education side, and well respected as teachers, then they put on these accomplished shows with material from school kids. See, we get parents who are worried about how much their kids understand our shows. Parents project their concerns. But kids are sophisticated, and the Monkeys prove it.”

Barrel of Monkeys was started 12 years ago by Erica Rosenfeld Halverson and Halena Kaya, who graduated from Northwestern University and wanted to do something similar to the university’s Griffin’s Tale theater for children. They began with a dozen Cambodian children in Albany Park, working with them on character and plot. Slowly, for years before “That’s Weird, Grandma” had a regular home, they made contacts in classrooms throughout the city, eventually building a network in 40 public schools, mostly underfunded, on the South and West sides. Then they expanded beyond schools.

Mary Hopkins, director of Loyola Park in Rogers Park, remembers the first time the company asked to work with kids in the park’s after-school programs. “The children were like their captive audience. We didn’t think any would come back.” Hopkins said. “And then we started getting kids who were coming just for them.”

Today, Loyola Park has 45 kids enrolled in Barrel of Monkeys writing workshops.

Most members of the company — currently teaching its six-week-long classes in 12 schools — are not professional educators. They receive arts funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Illinois Arts Council. They also charge schools about $3,000 per class. It’s worth it, said Elsa Carmona, principal of Little Village Academy. “Writing is one area our kids need work, and the way they pull out a child’s voice — my kids fall out of chairs laughing. They don’t know they’re learning, and my (standardized test scores) for reading and writing increased since we started with them.”

In 2005, when she hired Barrel of Monkeys, 49 percent of her third- and fourth-grade students were reading at or above their class level, she said. “Now it’s above 70 percent,” she said, citing the Monkeys as a major reason.

Monkeys do not get paid for performances. They get paid when they visit schools and work on the material used in the show. After a year of teaching, a performer is invited to join the cast. And
so “That’s Weird, Grandma” has developed into an unusual hybrid, a place where young actors start out and the theater scene takes in a show on its night off, a gathering spot for hipsters and third-graders alike, and — years before Spike Jonze’s "Where the Wild Things Are" attempted to capture the rhythm of childhood — a reminder that most art about the everyday concerns of children has no idea what children sound like.

“Actually, there isn’t a lot of art that does what they do at all,” said Mary Hynes-Berry, who specializes in literacy at Erikson Institute, the Chicago-based graduate school for early childhood developmental study. “You might think so, but it’s only every so often something really captures the voice of children, and it’s usually a book.” She said it’s rare because “as we become adults and our consciousness grows, we build meaning to the things we say and lose the capacity to express ourselves as freely as we did as children. A child’s narratives are inarticulate because their understanding of cause and effect is also inarticulate. But, of course, that’s also part of the charm of their stories.”

Two friends at Chalmers Elementary Specialty School, for instance, as documented by Barrel of Monkeys, were talking about designer sneakers. We are so rich, they said. But to get more rich, “we’re going to have to work for 18 years! Until we’re 20!” So they got rich. They went to Banana Republic. They went to Foot Locker. Then people just started giving them clothes. So they flew away and ate clouds and decided they will always be friends and live forever. And you know what? That’s what they did.

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“That’s Weird, Grandma” is performed at 8 p.m. Mondays at the Neo-Futurarium, 5153 N. Ashland Ave. Tickets are $9 for adults, $4 for children. Friday is the Barrel of Monkeys’ 8th Annual Fancy Schmancy Benefit performance, 7 p.m. at the Chicago Cultural Center, 77 E. Randolph St. 773-281-0638. Barrelofmonkeys.org.