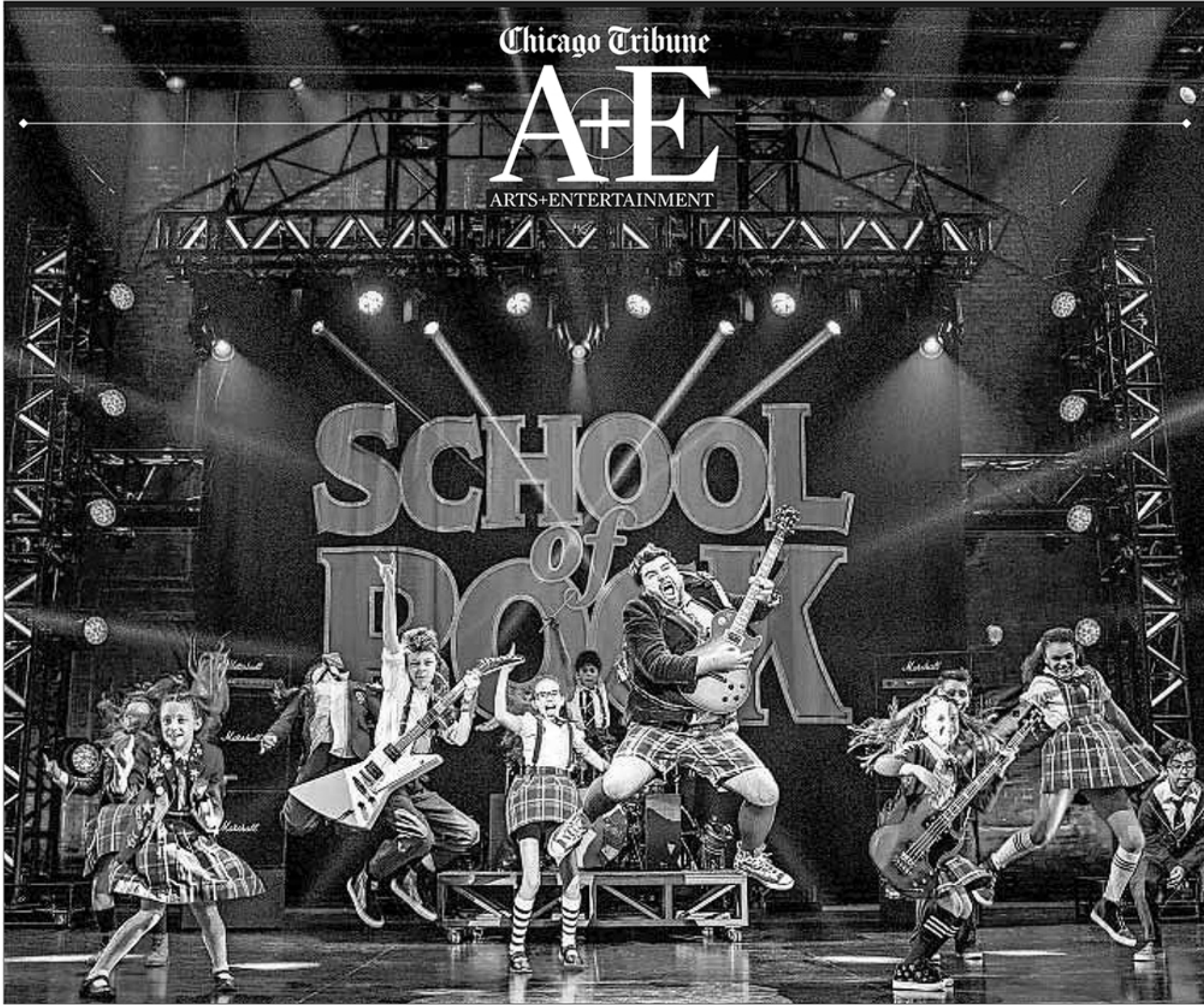


SCHOOL of ROCK



MATTHEW MURPHY PHOTOS

The cast of "School of Rock" is at the Cadillac Palace Theatre through Nov. 19. The stage-musical version of the beloved movie is rooted in the transformative power of music.

IN PERFORMANCE 'School of Rock' ★★★ 1/2

Power of music in session

Put your hands up for substitute teacher, kids in Lloyd Webber's touring 'School of Rock'

BY CHRIS JONES
Chicago Tribune

Dewey Finn, the interloping pedagogical hero of "School of Rock" and a character first created by Jack Black, is a tricky, shifty dude to play when live on stage.

This Mary Poppins of substitute music teaching has to be anti-establishment and anarchic enough that we believe he's sticking it to the man. Otherwise the stage-musical version of the justly beloved movie comes off as culturally milquetoast as Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Requiem."

But Lloyd Webber's "School of Rock" is, the great man has said, rooted in the transformative power of music. Sure. As I noted when I reviewed the

show on Broadway in 2015, this show also is of a piece with such similarly plotted works as "Billy Elliot" and "Matilda," all tuners created by scarred British baby boomers who mostly went to schools where no kids were empowered.

In "School of Rock," which I like a great deal, the adults, who must learn to listen to their young, are led around by the nose by their much smarter kids.

On the other hand, Dewey has to be totally benign. You can't believe he really will lead the nice kiddos into the darker corridors of rock culture — you have to feel secure he'll help them nab a bus, win the battle of the bands and still be home in time to do their math

Turn to Rock, Page 4



Rob Colletti, left, and Phoenix Schuman star in "School of Rock."



LIZ LAUREN PHOTO

Paul-Jordan Jansen, right, won for his title role in "Sweeney Todd."

49TH ANNUAL EQUITY JEFF AWARDS

Paramount's 'Sweeney' cleans up with 5 wins

BY MORGAN GREENE
Chicago Tribune

Paramount Theatre's "Sweeney Todd" won top honors at the 49th annual Equity Jeff Awards, a close shave of a competition between this season's union-affiliated theater productions in the Chicago area. The awards were to be held Monday night at the Drury Lane Theatre in Oakbrook Terrace.

Stephen Sondheim's thriller, staged at the Paramount in Aurora, scored five awards including best musical (large), best director (musical) for Jim Corti, best actor (principal/musical) for Paul-Jordan Jansen as the demon barber, best lighting design (large) and best music direction.

The evening's ceremonies were to be directed by Michael Weber and emceed by actors Mierka Gärten and Anish Jethmalani. Other winners included Court Theatre's "Blues for an Alabama Sky," for best play (large) and best director for Ron O.J. Parson; Remy Bumppo Theatre Company's "Born Yesterday" (play/midsize); Porchlight Music Theatre's "The Scottsboro Boys" (musical/midsize); and Drury Lane's "Smokey Joe's Cafe" (revue).

Winning actors included Victory Gardens' "Hand to God" star Alex Weisman, who will soon appear in "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child" on Broadway, and Angela Ingersoll,

Turn to Jeffs, Page 4

Cool Classics! makes CPS kids' lives better, a book at a time



RICK KOGAN
Sidewalks

If you have ever visited any of the thousands of classrooms in the 450-some public elementary schools in Chicago, you know that most are places where need is great and hope comes hard.

But for the past decade, hope has been arriving in the form of Mara Tapp and some of the other people who volunteer with the organization that she founded in 2006. It is called Cool Classics! and it has been out to change the world, one little kid at a time.

Is the name familiar, Mara Tapp? It might be, should be.

For years she worked in local media, as the longtime host of WBEZ radio's "The Mara Tapp Show" and as a frequent contributor to such high-profile publications as the Reader, the Sun-Times, Chicago magazine and the Tribune, and such smaller outlets as Playbill, Bookforum and Catalyst Chicago, the print and online news organization that covers education in the city.

Education is in Tapp's DNA. She is the daughter of teachers; both parents were professors at the University of Chicago. Her husband, Michael Silverstein, is also at the U. of C., a professor of anthropology and linguistics.



BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Mara Tapp reads with Isaiah Whittmon during a 2013 visit to Reavis elementary. She founded her after-school program in 2006.

Their two daughters, Ariella and Gabrielle, now in their 30s, both attended the city's public schools and are now, respectively, working in the Boston public school system and as a personal assistant in New York.

Shortly after leaving WBEZ and with her own two daughters well out of grammar school, Tapp felt the pull of the classroom. With master's degrees in English, literature and journalism from the University of Chicago and Northwestern University, she had had experience teaching at the School of the Art Institute and Columbia College and began substituting in grammar schools in the CPS system. "Just a couple of days a week

at first," she says. "But it didn't take me long to realize that these children lacked a lot of resources and were confronted with tremendous obstacles. I started thinking of ways that I could provide some of those resources and in so doing help get rid of those obstacles."

Indeed, the past decades have been tough in so many ways for the children of the public schools. Closings and consolidations, Safe Passage routes and budget slashing have left many, many schools without some necessities, devoid of programs in the arts and without librarians or libraries and thus without

Turn to Kogan, Page 4

Raise roof for teacher

Rock, from Page 1

homework. It's tough to pull off both. But Rob Colletti, the totally terrific star of the first national tour of "School of Rock," now playing its first Chicago stand at the Cadillac Palace Theatre, manages to walk that delicate walk. His previous gig was standing by for Elder Cunningham for "Book of Mormon," which is probably as good a training for Dewey as Broadway offers. The cleverness of "School of Rock" (the book is by Julian Fellowes and the lyrics are by Glenn Slater) lies in its ability to refocus the anti-establishment of rock as kiddie empowerment. It's not what you might call an exact equivalence, but the show makes it work. We all can rationalize our pasts.

This union-affiliated tour, which will be in and out of town more quickly than the material deserves, is a top-tier duplication of Laurence Connor's Broadway production, which is still playing in New York. Colletti's performance — which grew on me all night — stacks up very well against the original incarnation and makes some very viable and smart new choices. It's on the edge but also self-effacing where it needs to be, and,



MATTHEW MURPHY PHOTO

Rob Colletti, left, and the "School of Rock" cast put on an ideal family show.

When: Through Nov. 19
Where: Cadillac Palace Theatre, 151 W. Randolph St.
Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes
Tickets: \$27-\$98 at 800-775-2000 and www.broadwayinchicago.com

thank the rock gods, Colletti, who also sings the score well, never sentimentalizes his man. He's well supported by Lexie

Dorsett Sharp, playing the principal with a rocker inside.

"School of Rock," which is an ideal family show, works for a couple of dominant reasons. One is that the material really fits a musical (the main difference from the movie is that "School of Rock" has an original Lloyd Webber score, whereas the film featured the schoolkids playing rock classics). And the other is that the book to the show is, as screen-to-stage musicals go, un-

commonly witty.

The main stars, of course, are the kids. They play the instruments live, as the show keeps reminding us and they're a fabulously talented and lovable crew. JoAnn M. Hunter's choreography makes them look good all night. Inspirational, perhaps, for kids you may have sitting at home. On their phones.

Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.

cjones5@chicagotribune.com

A+E NOTES

3Arts awards grants to over 90 Chicago artists

More than 90 Chicago artists received grants Monday at the 10th annual 3Arts Awards, a celebration held by the Chicago-based nonprofit that advocates for artists of color, artists with disabilities and women in the arts.

The unusually large group of awardees is a result of a new peer-to-peer "Make a Wave" giving initiative, which allowed 83 former 3Arts recipients to select 83 winners of \$1,000 grants.

The 10 recipients of 3Arts' \$25,000 cash grants include Rivendell Theatre Ensemble artistic director Tara Mallen and Aguijon Theater co-artistic director Marcela Munoz, along with choreographers Ginger Lane and Meida Teresa McNeal, pianist Mabel Kwan, operatic baritone Will Liverman, teaching artists Ayriole Frost and Juan-Carlos Perez, and visual artists Alejandro T. Acierto and Tirtza Even.

The theater-focused recipients of the \$1,000 "Make a Wave" grants include Neo-Futurists artistic director Kurt Chisang, A Red Orchid Theatre artistic director Kirsten

Fitzgerald, Tofu Chitlin Circuit founder Sydney Chatman, costume designer Christine Pascual and theater artists Anna Bahow, J. Nicole Brooks, Lili-Anne Brown, Rinska Carrasco, Richard Costes, Jessie Fisher, Emjoy Gavino, Isaac Gomez, Daniel Kyri, Kelly O'Sullivan, Karen Rodriguez, Ericka Ratcliff, BrittneyLove Smith, Vanessa Valliere, Mary Williamson and Jay Worthington.

— Morgan Greene

Court Theatre's lead executive stepping down

Court Theatre said Monday that its executive director, Stephen J. Albert, is leaving his job next fall.

Albert, 66, has been with Court, a storied nonprofit theater with a \$4.5 million annual budget on the University of Chicago campus, since the beginning of 2010. There is to be a national search for his successor, who will work alongside longtime artistic director Charles Newell.

Albert told the Tribune that he wanted to make way for a younger generation of arts leaders and to refocus on his long-established consulting business.

"It's just time," he said. "I am ready for a less structured life."

During his tenure, Court developed much closer ties with the university and the Hyde Park community.

— Chris Jones



MICHAEL BROSILOW PHOTO

Court Theatre's "Blues for an Alabama Sky" took best play (large) and director honors.

Paramount's 'Sweeney' wins 5

Jeffs, from Page 1

for her portrayal of Judy Garland in Porchlight's "End of the Rainbow." Kathy Voytko scored for her role in the Marriott Theatre's "The Bridges of Madison County," and Michelle Lauto's many hats worn in "Spamilton" at the Royal George paid off in the revue category.

Writers Theatre walked away with the ensemble award for "East Texas Hot Links."

Three new works were recognized, including Michael Cristofer's "Man in the Ring" at Court Theatre, Lauren Gunderson and Margot Melcon's "Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley" at Northlight Theatre and Antoinette Nwandu's "Pass Over" at Steppenwolf Theatre Company.

The Jeffs' annual special award went to Steve Scott, who announced his retirement from the Goodman Theatre earlier this year.

2017 Equity Jeff Award Winners

PRODUCTION — PLAY — LARGE: "Blues for an Alabama Sky," Court Theatre

PRODUCTION — PLAY — MIDSIZE: "Born Yesterday," Remy Bumpo Theatre Company

PRODUCTION — MUSICAL — LARGE: "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," Paramount Theatre

PRODUCTION — MUSICAL — MIDSIZE: "The Scottsboro Boys," Porchlight Music Theatre

PRODUCTION — REVUE: "Smokey Joe's Cafe," Drury Lane Productions

DIRECTOR — PLAY: Ron OJ Parson, "Blues for an Alabama Sky," Court Theatre

DIRECTOR — MUSICAL: Jim Corti, "Sweeney Todd:"

The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," Paramount Theatre

ENSEMBLE: "East Texas Hot Links," Writers Theatre

ACTOR IN A PRINCIPAL ROLE — PLAY: Alex Weisman, "Hand to God," Victory Gardens Theater

ACTOR IN A PRINCIPAL ROLE — MUSICAL: Paul-Jordan Jansen, "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," Paramount Theatre

ACTRESS IN A PRINCIPAL ROLE — PLAY: Angela Ingersoll, "End of the Rainbow," Porchlight Music Theatre

ACTRESS IN A PRINCIPAL ROLE — MUSICAL: Kathy Voytko, "The Bridges of Madison County," Marriott Theatre

ACTOR IN A REVUE: Austin Cook, "Marry Me a Little," Porchlight Music Theatre

ACTRESS IN A REVUE: Michelle Lauto, "Spamilton," Royal George Theatre Cabaret

SOLO PERFORMANCE: Linda Reiter, "Rose," Greenhouse Theater Center in association with Forum Productions

ACTOR IN A SUPPORTING ROLE — PLAY: Marton Csokas, "Uncle Vanya," Goodman Theatre

ACTOR IN A SUPPORTING ROLE — MUSICAL: Jonathan Butler-Duplessis, "Parade," Writers Theatre

ACTRESS IN A SUPPORTING ROLE — PLAY: Kymberly Mellen, "The Columnist," American Blues Theater

ACTRESS IN A SUPPORTING ROLE — MUSICAL: E. Faye Butler, "Chicago," Drury Lane Productions

NEW PLAY: Michael Cristofer, "Man in the Ring," Court Theatre

NEW PLAY: Lauren Gunderson and Margot Melcon,

"Miss Bennet: Christmas at Pemberley," Northlight Theatre

NEW PLAY: Antoinette Nwandu, "Pass Over," Steppenwolf Theatre Company

CHOREOGRAPHY: Matthew Crowle, "Crazy for You," Drury Lane Productions

ORIGINAL MUSIC IN A PLAY: Orbert Davis, "Paradise Blue," TimeLine Theatre Company

MUSIC DIRECTION: Tom Vendafreddo, "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," Paramount Theatre

SCENIC DESIGN — LARGE: Jeffrey D. Kmiec, "The Little Mermaid," Paramount Theatre

SCENIC DESIGN — MIDSIZE: Joe Schemmoly, "Naperville," Theater Wit

LIGHTING DESIGN — LARGE: Nick Belley and Jesse Klug, "Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street," Paramount Theatre

LIGHTING DESIGN — MIDSIZE: Cat Davis, "The River Bride," Halcyon Theatre

COSTUME DESIGN — LARGE: Theresa Ham, "The Little Mermaid," Paramount Theatre

COSTUME DESIGN — MIDSIZE: Kristy Leigh Hall, "Pygmalion," Remy Bumpo Theatre

SOUND DESIGN — LARGE: Andre Pluess, "Man in the Ring," Court Theatre

SOUND DESIGN — MIDSIZE: Grover Holloway, "The Great and Terrible Wizard of Oz," The House Theatre of Chicago

PROJECTION DESIGN: Mike Tutaj, "Objects in the Mirror," Goodman Theatre

PUPPET DESIGN: Jesse Mooney-Bullock, "The Little Mermaid," Paramount Theatre

Making kids' lives better

Kogan, from Page 1

books that can be read for pleasure rather than for testing.

So, on her own, Tapp conceptualized and founded Cool Classics!, its mission to use books and music as ways of encouraging children to think critically and foster an appreciation (or even love) for the arts.

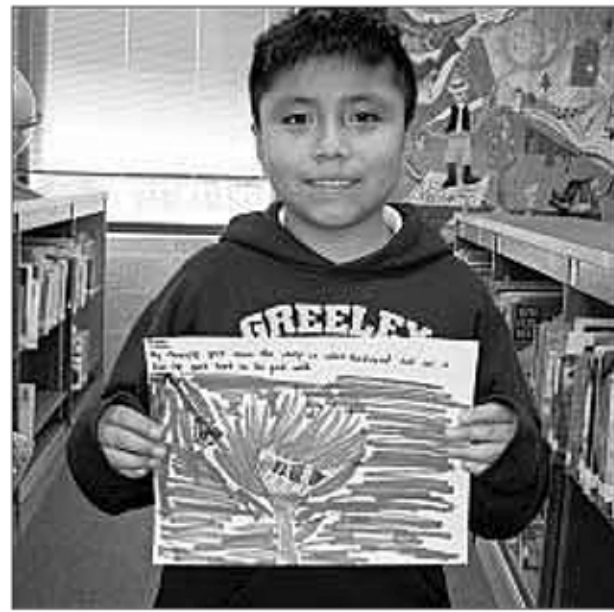
Roughly, this is the way it works: Over 25 after-school sessions, kids from prekindergarten to about fourth grade use the theme of a well-known children's book — selections have included "Pet of the Met" by Don and Lydia Freeman, with its Mozart-loving mouse, and "The Story of Ferdinand" by Munro Leaf, about a bull who refuses to participate in bullfights — as a foundation for learning about and as a means to explore, well, life.

They read the book and discuss it and then embellish that exchange with art and writing projects, performance pieces and taking field trips to local galleries, museums, libraries and theaters. Music is a large part of the process, as is watching film adaptations of the books. Artists and other experts visit the classrooms, and the kids end their sessions with trips to Powell's Books, where they can select free books to take home. They also have access to a lending library, comprised of 1,500 or so classic and contemporary children's books.

This all began as a pilot program in 2006 at the Walt Disney Magnet School on the North Side, which both of the Tapp daughters had attended. It has since expanded to Horace Greeley and Netelhorst schools on the North Side and to such South Side schools as CICS Loomis Primary Academy, William C. Reavis Math and Science Specialty, Jackie Robinson Literature and Writing, Beulah Shoemith, Emmett Louis Till Math and Science Academy and to the University of Chicago Charter School, Donoghue Campus.

"It blows me away on a daily basis," Tapp says. Parents and administrators (and of course the kids) agree.

"Cool Classics! has become an integral part of our schoolwide plan to foster a love for reading and learning," says Greeley Principal Carlos Azcoitia Jr. "Ms. Tapp's passion for the program is infectious and has transformed many of its participants."



DARSHITA SHAH PHOTO

Cool Classics! student Ryan Quito shows a drawing of his favorite part of "The Story of Ferdinand" by Munro Leaf.

"Participating in the program had a profound effect on our daughter, Vera," says Janice Cody. "When I asked her what she thought about the program she said, 'It was so great I can't even tell you.'"

Still, for all its success, Cool Classics! has operated mostly in the shadows.

That could change Thursday when the program is among 50 finalists for the 2017 National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Awards.

This is a prestigious outfit made up of folks from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies. The award is generally regarded as the country's highest honor for after-school and out-of-school arts and humanities programs, particularly those from underserved communities. The organization began presenting awards in 1998, and its Chicago winners include programs from such esteemed and comparatively well-known local outfits as Chicago Shakespeare, the Merit School of Music, Better Boys Foundation, the city's Department of Cultural Affairs and the Chicago Children's Choir.

This year's finalists were selected from 342 applicants from 42 states. Twelve of the 50 finalists will be awarded \$10,000 grants as well various support opportunities.

Tapp knew nothing of this award until last year, when Laura Jenkins, the children's librarian at the Uptown branch of the Chicago Public Library, at 929 W. Buena Ave., told her about it.

The women had known one another for some time, since Cool Classics! has long partnered with neighborhood libraries to display some of the artwork made by its students (such work is on exhibit at the Uptown branch through May).

So one day last year Jenkins told Tapp about the award, adding, "This has your name written all over it," and Tapp applied, and a few weeks ago learned that Cool Classics! was among the finalists.

"Of course we are thrilled to be recognized," Tapp said Monday, getting ready to grab a plane for the ceremonies Thursday in Washington, D.C. "But we don't do this for prizes or awards. We do this for the children."

Her organization subsists on donations and some modest grants and on the volunteer efforts of a few dozen people "from a vast cross-section," says Tapp. "We have parents, grandparents, veterans, retirees, students from area colleges. It's very gratifying."

Cool Classics! has, of course, come of age in a time when violence and death have become increasingly tragic shadows in the classrooms, and Tapp is well aware of how that can affect the kids. "It comes up all the time," she says. "Many of our books have themes of nonviolence, and we explore that energetically. We have had some intense conversations."

"The reality is that no one deserves to die in the ways that so many are dying. What these children deserve is the chance to live and the chance to make the world a better place."

rkogan@chicagotribune.com
 Twitter @rickkogan