

Building Character

'ZAK' TEACHES
KIDS TO SAY
'I'VE GOT TO BE ME'

By Camilla A. Herrera

STAFF WRITER

It is Zak's turn to change a child's life. "It's really very simple," he says, after landing on Earth from his home on the Comet Starmitacus. It has been 100 years since the last Starmitaci mission.

"I have to get a kid to statistically achieve maximum physiological, neurological and age-appropriate emotional potential as related to a self-realized sense of id," he says.

Huh?
"To get a kid to believe in himself," clarifies Zak, who was selected this century to help Lisa, Willie and C.J. reach self-assurance in "The Adventures of Zak," a family musical by Carter Norton and Karen Nisenson.

The show will be staged Saturday afternoon at the Palace Theatre in Stamford as part of a fund-raiser and public awareness campaign for Childcare Learning Centers, which serve 1,250 children and their families at 20 sites in Stamford and Greenwich.

"Children are faced with choices," explains Norton, who also produces the show with Johnny Montagnese for the Magical Music for Life Foundation, a nonprofit Norton heads from her home in New Canaan. "They may not feel it, but they always have a choice. You can try or quit, or be angry or be proud.

"The main message, I think, is we try to give the kids the power, through the lyrics, to face the decisions, know what the choices are and figure a way to respond."

It is up to Zak to do the same for Lisa, Willie and C.J., pre-teens who each struggle with oblivious but well-meaning parents.

"I want to be the one who sets you free, sometimes I'm scared of what your path might be," sing the parents in an opening number.

"How can I make them understand what really makes me who I am?" sing the children at the same time.

"I've gotta be the me that's in me. I've gotta be who I am! But I've gotta find what it is that is me before I can be all I can."

Enter Zak, with a loud crash.



"The Adventures of Zak," featuring an otherworldly creature who visits Earth to teach kids to believe in themselves, will be staged in Stamford Saturday afternoon.

"As Zak gets to know these kids, we learn how multifaceted they are and how they each face conflicts," says Don Rickenback, the show's director. "They not only learn from Zak but we learn from them and they learn from each other."

Norton's idea for the show grew out of dissatisfaction that little in the way of family fare intelligently dealt with issues children face while growing up. She coupled that with the substance she drew from bedtime conversations she would have with her five children.

"I used to compose songs for my children to help them with the many issues they faced in their day," says Norton.

What resulted in 1999 was a show intended for its educational merit to be performed as a fund-raising tool for pediatric charities.

Since 2000, "Zak" has landed in New Canaan for Horizons Student Enrichment Program and the Outback Teen Center; Darien for the Depot Teen Center; Westport for the Children's Health Environmental Coalition; Bronxville, N.Y., for Lawrence Hospital Center; Hartford for the Connecticut Children's Medical Center and Boys & Girls Club at Trinity; New York City for the Archdiocese of New York Patrons Program. Everybody Wins Foundation, Reach Charter School, Madison Square Garden Boys & Girls Club and the Mor-

gan Stanley Children's Hospital at New York-Presbyterian; Boston for the National Kidney Foundation; and Jackson Hole, Wyo., for The Learning Center.

The cast is scheduled to sing as part of the White House Easter commemoration.

The lessons in "Zak" run the gamut, from the lighthearted to the heartfelt, with such songs as "The Struggles in Life Are Good for Me," "Can't," "Aren't You Glad that You Grow" "The Gift

of Today" and "Your Heart is a Compass," all meant to bolster self-esteem and enhance family communication.

Implied in the arc of the play's message and the struggles faced by Lisa, Willie and C.J. is a call for parents to remember being a child. That many don't, says Rickenback, is a common block to communication.

Also revealing is the play's call for children to learn how to accept responsibility. "It is difficult to see that the choices exist," concedes

Norton. "But there are different ways of responding to (choices) and standing by them."

For emphasis, Norton asks to consider the behavior of a punished 6-year-old. "If they don't take responsibility, they blame the parent," she says. "But if you look at yourself and admit the mistake, the world is a happier place because not only is a lesson learned but there is a choice to make the world happier. If you pin blame on someone else, you are powerless."



Contributed photos

what: "The Adventures of Zak"

where: The Palace Theatre, 61 Atlantic St., Stamford

when: Saturday, 5 p.m.

price: \$15-\$50

contact: 325-4466

"The kids are also singing the message," adds Rickenback. "It's a transference of (the play's) message to the kids in the community who take it home and pass it on."

What is left is for Zak to succeed and earn new wings with lightning bolts of success. Will he?

"Oh the struggles in life are good for me," sings Zak. "They help me be the best I'll be. I know each struggle that I go through can make the next one easier, too."

"So don't make life too easy for me. The struggles in life are good, you see. When you see I'm in way over my head, don't help me out. Let me swim instead."

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