

The History of the Youth Music Theatre Workshop

The Youth Music Theatre Workshop began in 1996 under the direction of Julia Aubrey, Director of Opera Theatre at the University of Mississippi, with her husband, Robert, as the conductor for the performances. It was designed to fill a need in the community for children's theatre and enrolled fifteen children between the ages of 10 - 16. The workshop met three hours each morning for two weeks and was designed to develop performance skills in music, drama, and movement through creative exercises. At the end of the two weeks, the workshop culminated in an hour-long production of an operetta or original musical revue.

In 1997, the Yoknapatawpha Arts Council co-sponsored the workshop along with UM Opera Theatre. For several years, this collaboration saw the numbers grow to over 50 students, ages 9 - 17, and move from Meek Auditorium on the university campus to the Power House as its theatrical home. More UM faculty joined the workshop to provide a pianists, choreographers, and student assistants for the growing participation. Scholarships were developed by the director to offer this experience to underserved children.

In 2006, the director moved the workshop back on campus as an outreach project for the UM Opera Theatre Ensemble. In 2008, the children were allowed to present a youth version of *HMS Pinafore* on the professional set designed for the Oxford Shakespeare Festival's production of *HMS Pinafore*. From that collaboration, the YMTW joined the Festival with a children's version of *Iolanthe* and trained the children for *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*. For *Camelot*, a special pre-show was written for the children called *The Sword in the Stone*. Original musical works were written to give the children experience with a wide variety of musical styles: Orphans on Broadway, Scenes from Animated Musicals, Princess Dae & Princess Nite, and an original pastiche, *Topsy Turvedom*.

Since 2017, the workshop now offered two sessions for ages 7 – 12 and ages 13 – 18 with two separate performances at the end of the two weeks. Produced by the Ford Center for the Performing Arts with a generous grant from Nancye Starnes and the Kite Foundation and Madison Charitable Foundation, the professional staff has expanded to offer more teaching skills, such as stage combat and acting classes, along with music and movement instruction. The production values have been expanded and the number of children served has increased. These children will now have the opportunity to perform in a professional theatre under the guidance of professional instructors devoted to enriching young lives through the Arts.