

**Learning Everywhere**  
**The Impact of the Springer Theatre Academy on**  
**the Springer Opera House**  
An Investigation

March 20, 2008  
Artistic Logistics

# **Table of Contents**

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Overview and Context</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Description of the Academy</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Academy-related Ticket Sales</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Survey Results</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Anatomy of Connections</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Existing Conditions</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Organizational Decisions</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Motivating Factors</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Implications for the Field</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Appendix A: Comparable Organizations Reviewed</b>	
<b>Appendix B: Survey Results</b>	
<b>Appendix C: Individuals Involved in the Investigation</b>	

## Executive Summary

During a time when theatre companies across the USA are losing subscribers and desperately seeking new ways to build audiences, the Springer Opera House in Columbus, Georgia has seen increases in ticket sales and an increase in the number of young people in the audience over the last three years. As those young people themselves might say, what's up with that? How is the State Theatre of Georgia, a venerable institution if ever there were one, regularly reaching teens and twenty-somethings?

The answers lie in a series of decisions and a set of exemplary practices around a key component of the Springer's programming since 1997: The Springer Theatre Academy. This hands-on theatre education program for children from ages 5 to 18 is yielding unexpected benefits for the larger organization of which it is a part. To borrow the contemporary vernacular again: well, duh. Isn't that happening for everyone who has some kind of education program, it builds audiences among young people and their families? Actually, no. Few if any performing arts institutions measure the ticket sales impact of their training and education programs and their anecdotal evidence of youth and family attendance is not as strong as the Springer's.

The Springer Opera House hired Artistic Logistics to find out why the Academy is having this impact. Through a series of interviews with students, parents, teachers, Springer staff, Columbus-area leaders and education directors at comparable companies around the country, we have arrived at the following key answers to the many questions this positive trend raises. Many more answers are contained in the body of this report.

- The Springer has made the Academy integral to its programming and artistic vision, rather than treating it as a revenue generator that is ancillary to mainstage programming.
- The philosophical basis of the Theatre Academy – “life skills through stage skills” – creates an entry point for students regardless of their ambitions for a life in the theatre.
- The excellence of the program has built strong bonds between Academy families – students and their parents – and the Springer Opera House. The characteristics of this excellence include caring and committed leadership, teachers who share the philosophy and highly organized administration. All of these add up to consistently fun engagement for students
- The Springer has capitalized on its location, history, standing in the community and strong administration in creating and implementing the Academy.

The Springer Theatre Academy has reached its maximum enrollment capacity within the Springer's current facility and the Summer program is now so successful the staff “doesn't dare advertise” it. Parents sometimes hand-carry their registration forms to the Education office so that they can be sure their children are accepted into the program; demand for re-enrollment from young people is extremely high.

With an average of 750 students each year in Summer, Fall and Winter programs, the Academy offers the Springer a broad universe of potential ticket buyers. Parents of Academy students over the last ten years currently hold 11% of the Springer's season ticket accounts (which may include two to six subscription packages) and a robust 42% of single ticket accounts.

### *The Investigation Process*

Artistic Logistics began this investigation with the Springer staff to understand the history and practice of the Academy as a program. Small group discussions with current students and their parents yielded enthusiastic responses about the impact of the Academy and the delight students take in attending performances with their friends and families. There is significant value to the way in which the students become a known quantity at the Springer – they are onstage, backstage and in the audience, enjoying the social aspects as well as the discipline required in this art form. Focused conversations with Columbus-area leaders and Springer board members revealed more about the thorough integration of the Academy into the organization’s operations.

A scan of similar theatre companies (and one dance company) around the country yielded the surprising information that the correlation between education programs and ticket sales is rarely if ever tracked.<sup>1</sup> There are no standards in the field by which to judge the Springer’s performance. We also administered a survey to the Academy families and studied the results of a survey conducted by the Springer in 2005.<sup>2</sup> The Springer staff and volunteers exhaustively researched Academy and box office records to develop quantitative information about ticket sales impact. Finally, the consulting team brought our observations back to the Springer staff leaders to work with them on prioritizing our findings, which are contained in this report.

### *Institutional Opportunities*

The success of the Springer Theatre Academy creates a set of opportunities for the Springer Opera House. Clearly, demand for the program argues well for its continued growth as facilities and staffing become available. The Springer may wish to position itself as a resource for teacher training in a variety of techniques, since Academy students are demanding more theatre in their public education during the school year. Parent involvement in the program is high. Unlike most comparable theatres, parents are welcome to observe classes, but parent involvement could be formalized in a way that would deepen family connections to the Springer. And the achievements of the Academy are a public relations gold mine, providing an excellent story to increase the Springer’s recognition as a leader in the arts in Georgia and the southeastern US.

### *Conclusions*

The Springer Theatre Academy’s positive impact on the Springer Opera House is the result of a set of deliberate decisions to make the program central to every aspect of the Springer’s operations. This is an organization that has embraced learning at every level rather than relegating it to second-class status. That learning is comprehensive – about the glorious history of the Springer, about the day-to-day joys and challenges of making theatre, and about what is possible in the future for both the students and the institution. In many ways, this mirrors the way Academy students close each class day. During Salutations, an exercise set to music, the Academy Director asks the students and their teachers to symbolically fill the theatre with their presence, mixing it with that of their fellow artists — those of today, those who have come before, and those who may follow after. Through Salutations, they acknowledge the present, honor the past and salute the future.

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<sup>1</sup> A list of those organizations is found in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> The survey data is found in Appendix B.

The Springer Theatre Academy is creating its future today, through exemplary education that builds life-long connections with people who care deeply about the Springer Opera House.

On behalf of the consultant team of Kathy Blandin, PhD., and Lauryn Menard, it has been an honor to investigate the impact of the Academy on the Springer Opera House. We hope this report will prove useful to the Springer and the theatre field in understanding how educational programming can strengthen every aspect of a theatre's operations.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lisa Mount". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping tail that extends to the right.

Lisa Mount  
Director  
Artistic Logistics

## Overview and Context

Eleven years ago, the Springer Opera House made a strategic decision to reinvent its educational programming. Since 1972, the Springer had provided theatre training and classes for youth through the Springer School of Theatre Arts. Though the program had been in existence for twenty five years, it was never a central focus of the organization. Class size and success varied from year to year. There was no consistent curriculum over the years and no overall vision driving the program. The Springer School of Theatre Arts was neither a great success nor a great failure; it provided an outlet for creative young people that complimented the Springer Opera House but didn't animate it.

In 1997, artistic director Paul Pierce was envisioning the next area of programmatic growth for the Springer Opera House. In the early 1990s, Paul had led the Springer through a period of major growth and transformation. Initiatives like the Springer Theatre on Tour had significantly broadened the Springer's audience base and impact in the local and regional community. Having reconnected the community to the Springer and its shows, Paul turned his attention to the educational programming. Ron Anderson joined the Springer staff as Associate Artistic Director, coming from FirstStage in Milwaukee, a leading organization in theatre education. Ron brought with him a philosophy that would become the foundation and a crucial element of the program – teaching life skills through stage skills.

After a year of planning and networking in the community, the Springer began its new theatre education program – The Dorothy W. McClure Springer Theatre Academy. Paul and Ron knew that the Academy would have an impact on the Springer. They expected enrollment in the program to increase, and it did. Students and parents were excited and interested by the curriculum, the philosophy and the experience. The program continued to grow over time, and the Springer openly embraced policies that would connect the program more deeply to general operations.

Five years ago, the Springer began to notice an unexpected impact of the Academy. Academy students were coming to see the Springer's shows. They were bringing their parents for nights out with the family. The high school students were coming for group date nights. Families were becoming season ticket holders. There was a new audience demographic attending Springer shows. And, at the same time, ticket sales - both season and single - were increasing. The increase in season subscriptions contradicts a strong contemporary trend in the performing arts.

How had the Theatre Academy and the Springer generated this response from their participants and their families? What had created such a deep connection? And though there was anecdotal evidence of students and families attending the shows, what was the actual, quantitative impact? In 2007, the Springer Opera House engaged Artistic Logistics to investigate these questions.

With the creation and implementation of the Theatre Academy, the Springer Opera House reinvented how its educational programming related to the larger organization. Instead of being primarily a source of revenue and secondary to the artistic vision of the organization, the Theatre Academy became vital to all aspects of the Springer. Putting the Academy at the center of the organization has significantly impacted the Springer, the Academy students, their families and the

community.

A combination of factors has led to increased audiences who have a strong loyalty to the Springer. This is life-long audience development, engaging young people who have the potential to spend the rest of their lives attending the Springer. As of this writing, the Springer is seeing consistent increases in ticket sales, and anecdotal and quantitative evidence ascribes much of that increase to the impact of the Academy.

## Description of the Academy

**Figure 1: Example of Academy programming for 2007**

*Winter Session (January 13<sup>th</sup> to February 10<sup>th</sup>)*

Programs	Ages	Duration	Classes
Junior Program	5 - 8	5 weeks, Saturdays	Intro to Theatre
Main Program	9 - 18	5 weeks, Saturdays	Acting, Musical Theatre, Stilt Making, Intro to Costuming, Intro to Directing

*Summer session (June 4<sup>th</sup> to July 27<sup>th</sup>)*

Programs	Ages	Duration	Classes
Junior Program	5 - 8	2 weeks, every day	Intro to Theatre
Main Program	9 - 18	2 – 4 weeks, every day	Stage Movement, Scene Study, Drumimprov, Voice & Speech, Playwriting, Musical Theatre

*Fall session (September 22<sup>nd</sup> to October 27<sup>th</sup>)*

Programs	Ages	Duration	Classes
Junior Program	5 - 8	6 weeks, Saturdays	Intro to Theatre
Main Program	9 - 18	6 weeks, Saturdays	Acting, Musical Theatre, Pantomime, Tap Dance for Theatre, Stilt Walking, Improvisation, Stage Management, Show Bizness

The Springer Theatre Academy serves 750 students each year and has an approximate annual budget of \$250,000. The program offers a summer session structured as a day-camp and fall and winter sessions of Saturday classes.

The summer session curriculum consists of six core acting classes: stage movement, voice & speech, improvisation, scene study, playwriting, and musical theatre. All students in the main

program take all six classes. Students can participate in entry level classes for a two-week camp that culminates in a presentation of class work for family and friends. Experienced students can audition for three or four week sessions that offer advanced versions of the core curriculum classes. The main core curriculum classes are for students ages 9 to 18. The Academy has a junior program for students ages 5 to 8 that introduces them to theatre through storytelling, improvisation, puppetry, singing and creative movement.

The fall and winter Saturday classes are an elective curriculum and students can choose to participate in one or more classes. The Academy offers an average of seven elective classes per session and the classes vary from stilt walking to stage management. The fall and winter sessions always offer the junior program for younger students.

The Academy offers need-based scholarships and has a work-study program to assist students attend the program. All students who are new to the Academy's main program are required to attend an admissions orientation, which is conducted by Ron Anderson, who directs the Academy, and Amy Bishop, Springer Education Coordinator, who is the Academy administrator. Students and parents learn about the Theatre Academy's structure, philosophy, curriculum, program logistics, facilities, and policies.

Academy enrollment is at maximum capacity, and the Springer has diminished its publicity of the program over the last few years in order to turn down fewer potential students. This has lessened the public relations value of the Academy to the Springer; new press strategies that de-emphasize enrollment (until facilities expansions take place) are being developed.

## **Academy-Related Ticket Sales**

The initial impetus for this study was the concurrent increase in ticket sales and the number of Academy students in the Springer's audiences. Quantifying that increase is far more difficult than relying on anecdotal evidence. The Academy has a separate database from the Springer box office and over the past several years data has been sporadically cross-referenced. In a perfect world, we would be able to chart Academy-related ticket sales for the past ten years, but no non-profit theatre operates in a perfect world. *None* of the comparable companies studied had any box office data on sales to educational programming participants or their families. There are no standards for the field against which to measure the Springer's performance.

Overall audience growth at the Springer has been remarkable – a 17% jump in the last year alone. That said, the box office numbers for Springer Academy families paint an even prettier picture. On average, over the last three years, Academy families have held 11% of the Springer's season ticket accounts and they represent a robust 42% of single ticket accounts. Ticket accounts represent the individual who placed a season order, and may include any number of subscription packages - most often two, but three to six season tickets in one order is not uncommon. Single ticket accounts can represent as many as two to six tickets to each show. The definition of Academy family includes parents of students who are now alumni. Families for the last ten years were tracked to determine their ticket buying habits.

In terms of dollars, Academy families represent 8% of season ticket sales. Those families purchase an additional \$18,000 per year in single tickets, beyond their season subscriptions. Academy families who do not subscribe nonetheless purchase \$24,000 in single tickets to main stage performances each year, and account for 32% of single ticket accounts. Finally, Academy families are also represented in the Springer Society donors who add contributions to their season ticket orders, contributing nearly \$12,000 (14% of all contributions made with season ticket purchases).

Where most theaters have only subscribers as their reliable base of sales, the Springer Opera House has another consistent group of ticket buyers on which it can rely: Academy families.

## **Survey Results**

In order to get more quantitative and qualitative information about the relationship of Academy families to audience development at the Springer Opera House, two surveys were used.

The first survey, designed by Springer staff, was administered in the fall of 2005 to then-current and former Academy parents. The Springer initiated the first survey in response to the evidence they were seeing of impact that the Theatre Academy was having on the Springer's audience. The survey focused on how attending the Springer Theatre Academy had affected the family's theatre attendance in general.

The second survey, designed by Artistic Logistics, was specifically created to generate information about what aspects of the Theatre Academy parents and students find important. The survey was administered in the fall of 2007 to current Academy parents and students. The second survey focused on both ticket purchasing for Springer shows and the reasons that the families felt invested in the Theatre Academy.

The 2005 survey was mailed to 544 Theatre Academy parents, and 388 parents returned completed surveys. The 2007 survey was available to Academy families in hard copy and online through Survey Monkey, and 50 families submitted completed surveys. [Both surveys and their overall results appear in appendix B.]

The results from both surveys indicated that the Academy parents and students were attending more performances at the Springer and other theatres after participating in the Academy program (2005: 79%, 2007: 87.8%). These results indicate that the program has a major impact on student and parent interest and engagement in the theatre, validating the concept that hands-on theatre education programming is a way to create new audiences for theatre companies.

Both surveys asked specific questions about season ticket purchasing. In both surveys, nearly equal percentages of respondents indicated they had purchased season tickets (2005: 31%, 2007: 34.7%). Of the survey respondents who had purchased season tickets to the Springer Opera House, a clear majority had done so after participating in the program (2005: 83%, 2007: 74%). While more in-depth statistical analysis needs to be conducted, these results strongly suggest a cause and effect relationship between young people participating in the Theatre Academy and their parents becoming season ticket holders at the Springer Opera House.

## **Anatomy of Connections**

Having determined that participation in the Springer Theatre Academy increases ticket-buying, we endeavored to understand *why* it has that effect. Our research indicates three distinct ways the Springer Opera House has created a strong sense of connection to the organization for Springer Theatre Academy students and their families: we have labeled these Existing Conditions, Organizational Decisions and Motivating Factors. The Existing Conditions are situational and environmental factors that impacted the relationship between the Theatre Academy and the Springer Opera House. These conditions were not necessarily created by the organization, though they have been used for the organization's benefit. The Institutional Decisions are organizational choices that the Springer Opera House has taken that have made the focus on creating community through education programming a central aspect for the organization. These decisions, when viewed in comparison to other theatre companies around the country, demonstrate how the Springer has transformed the way youth programming and classes are viewed from within the organization. Finally, the Motivating Factors are what bring students (and parents) back to the Academy year after year. These factors are where we see the results of the Springer's best practices in the field of theatre education.

## **Existing Conditions**

### *Historic Landmark*

Designated the State Theatre of Georgia by Governor Jimmy Carter in 1971, the Springer Opera House is a valued historic landmark. Built in 1871, the Springer Opera House stands in downtown Columbus near the banks of the Chattahoochee River. Renovated in 1964, and more recently in 1998-99, the Springer Opera House maintains the opulent style of a 19<sup>th</sup> century European theatre house - curving double balconies, delicate tulip lights, a high proscenium arch – while also being equipped with state-of-the-art rehearsal facilities and technical equipment. Throughout its more than 130-year history, a number of well-known, historical figures have played the Springer's stage – Edwin Booth, Ma Rainey, John Phillip Sousa, Will Rogers and Franklin D. Roosevelt. An awareness and appreciation of the building's rich history permeates conversations and discussions with members of the Springer Opera House community. Staff, performers, patrons and Academy students and families all share in the experience and responsibility of keeping the history of the Springer Opera House alive for the future.

### *Downtown Revitalization*

As a historic landmark building, the Springer Opera House is an important aspect of the downtown Columbus landscape. When, in the mid-1990's, Columbus began focusing on the renewal and revitalization of its demoralized and mostly-vacant downtown, the Springer Opera House was in the right place at the right time. There was an influx of businesses and government offices downtown. The city raised money to create more sidewalks, parks and recreation areas. A huge fundraising effort supported the expansion and development of cultural arts organizations in the downtown area. The "Columbus Challenge" raised millions of dollars that supported the creation of the RiverCenter for the Performing Arts and the re-location of Columbus State University's Schwob School of Music to downtown, as well as supporting the renovation of the Springer Opera House. Being a part of the revitalization efforts has increased the Springer's visibility within the

Columbus community, and the return of vitality to the downtown area has had a major impact on all aspects of the Springer Opera House. The creation of the Springer Theatre Academy in 1996-7 is connected to the revitalization efforts downtown. Continuing to foster a vital and energetic downtown remains a focus for Columbus and its citizens and the Springer Opera House continues to benefit from the development in its vicinity.

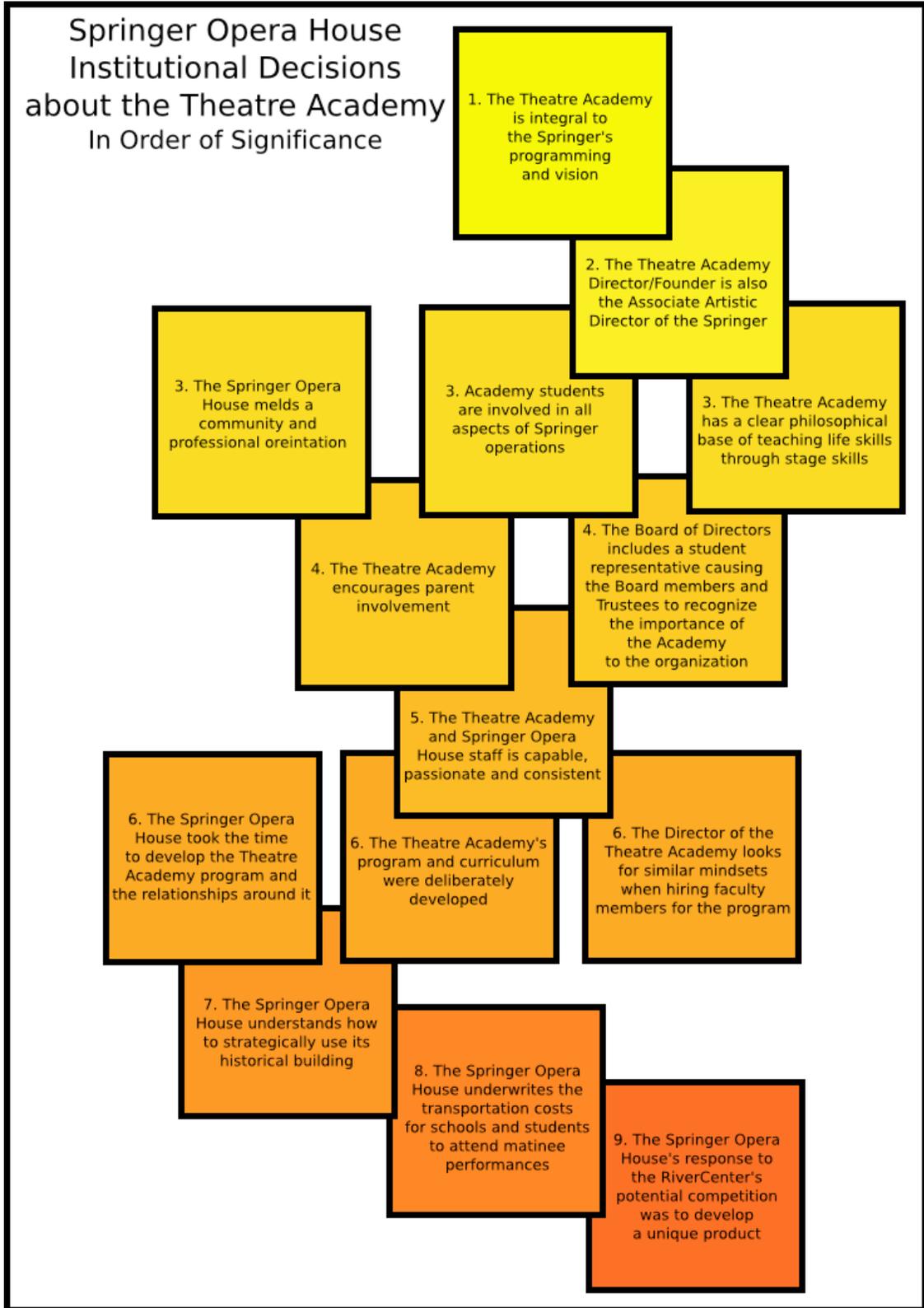
### *Consistent Leadership*

While being a historic landmark located downtown are conditions that have played a significant role in the Springer's overall health and sustainability, the organization has also benefited from strong, committed, consistent leaders during the past two decades. Paul Pierce has served as the Producing Artistic Director for the Springer since 1988. During this time, the Springer's audience base has tripled in size. Paul initiated the development of the Springer Theatre on Tour, a program that tours the southeast bringing fully self-contained performances – sets, lights, costumes, etc. – to smaller communities and venues, which greatly expanded the impact of the Springer in the region. In 1996, Paul brought Ron Anderson to the Springer for the express purpose of developing a theatre education program. Ron is both the Associate Artistic Director for the Springer and the Director of the Theatre Academy. Both Paul and Ron have acted, directed, written plays and taught. They are well known and respected throughout the arts and philanthropic community of Columbus, Georgia and the southeast. Their personal and professional investment in creating the Theatre Academy, living its philosophy, and connecting it to the entire organization's operations has been a critical condition for the success of the program and the effect that it has had on developing the Springer's audience.

## **Institutional Decisions**

While external conditions aided in the development and success of the Springer Academy, many internal decisions about the creation and administration of the Academy resulted in strong connections between the Springer Opera House and Academy families. These decisions, sometimes consciously made and sometimes the result of putting the program in motion, came to light through interviews with staff, students, parents, board members and community members, as well as written responses to survey questions. While all of the decisions had an impact on the Academy and the Springer Opera House, they are presented in order of the level of significance they have had on Academy student and family investment in the Springer. Figure 2 is a visual representation of this hierarchy.

**Figure 2: Institutional Decisions Chart**



### **The Theatre Academy is integral to Springer Opera House programming and vision.**

*"Every moment is an educational opportunity at the Springer." - Paul Pierce*

Making the Academy integral to the Springer's overall programming and vision has been a pivotal decision. With this decision, the Springer veered away from the generally-held perspective that theatre education classes and programming are secondary to artistic programming. Instead the Springer chose to make the Theatre Academy classes, students and families a central component of the organization. While the Academy does have a positive impact on the bottom line, it has a greater influence on the Springer's artistic directions and decisions, and it is viewed as a resource of talent and ability for the organization. For example, when planning the upcoming Mainstage season, scripts that have roles for youth are specifically sought out and brought to the attention of the Artistic Director. The Springer incorporates Theatre Academy students into all areas of productions, from performing in shows to working backstage and in administrative capacities.

### **The Theatre Academy Director and Founder is also the Associate Artistic Director of the Springer.**

*"Ron Anderson is the conscience of this company. I ask myself 'what's Ron going to say about this?'" - Paul Pierce*

The deep connection between the Theatre Academy and the artistic vision of the Springer Opera House is the result of the joint role Ron holds as Director of the Theatre Academy and as Associate Artistic Director. With this staff structure in place, it would have been impossible for the Academy to become tangential to the rest of the organization. Instead it has grown to stand as a central feature of the Springer. As the Associate Artistic Director, the Director of the Academy works very closely with the Producing Artistic Director to shape the artistic vision of the organization. The relationship between Ron and Paul is rooted in mutual trust and respect and functions with a high level of input and communication. Academy families know that Ron and Paul are looking out for them, and that they are recognized leaders within the Academy, the organization and the community. Their dynamic, collaborative leadership is felt by the Springer's staff and by the Academy students, yielding a stable environment to which they return year after year.

### **The Theatre Academy has a clear philosophical base of teaching "Life Skills through Stage Skills."**

*"The influence of the people and the value of the skills learned has enriched my son's life – attitude, behavior, confidence, sense of humor, friendships and more." - Academy parent*

When the Springer Opera House hired Ron Anderson to develop the Academy, it was with the knowledge that he brought a particular concept of theatre education. Accordingly, Ron created a program with a strong philosophical base of teaching life skills through stage skills. The Theatre Academy has never aimed solely to create professional actors or actresses, or even just to expose youth to the theatre. Instead the Academy works to create confident, capable people and leaders through the medium of theatre. When students participate in Academy classes, they are taught theatre skills – stage movement, voice and speech, improvisation, musical theatre, scene study, playwriting – but, through those technical skills and lessons, they learn much more. The class curricula are filled with emphases on building confidence, increasing concentration, improving

cooperation, teamwork, listening, observing, a sense of language, and so on. Even the day structure – beginning with “challenges” and ending with “acknowledgements” – serves as a model of social and character education. The introduction to the Academy's summer curriculum overview encapsulates the philosophy and attitude of the program:

*We want our students to have fun and make friends, learn something about theatre, and learn something about themselves. We want our students to learn the value of discipline, commitment, integrity and teamwork. We want our students to be competent in the craft and confident in themselves, fearless on stage, and joyously supportive of each other.*

Having a clear philosophical base gives the Academy a foundation and unifying purpose. Even though each class covers different skills and aspects of the craft, they are all unified in purpose – to engage and develop the whole child. This focus of the Academy has extended beyond the classrooms, into the consciousness of the whole organization.

### **The Springer Opera house combines a community and professional orientation.**

*"Every great theatre is a community theatre - in the midst of becoming a regional theatre, the Springer did not shut its doors to community involvement." - Paul Pierce*

The Springer Opera House, as an organization, has melded the openness and accessibility of a community theatre into its work as a professional theatre. The Springer Opera House invites artists from around the nation to perform on their stage alongside Columbus-based actors. The Springer invites local professional and amateur artists to audition; young people can only audition if they have completed one summer of Academy training. The Springer actively recruits community volunteers, including students at the Theatre Academy, to help in the many and varied production aspects of a performance, backstage and "front of house."

### **Students are involved in all aspects of Springer operations.**

*"We want to have a theatre that the Academy can be proud of." - Scooter MacMillan, Marketing Director*

Being a student in the Theatre Academy means becoming an essential part of the Springer Opera House. As mentioned before, the Springer Opera House specifically considers and often chooses to produce shows with roles for Theatre Academy students. Being a non-union (IATSE) house allows the Springer to involve students in all areas backstage. By comparison, a majority of similar theatre companies do not have any student involvement in productions aside from the occasional age-appropriate role or student intern, often college-aged students. In the Academy, students are taught that every person involved in a performance is of equal importance whether the lead role in the play or a crew member placing a prop on stage. They learn that each individual has a vital role to play in the success of the production. The Springer enables Academy students to connect their study of the craft of theatre to a real-life context of a production. By encouraging and enabling the Theatre Academy students to participate in all aspects of the organization, the Springer reinforces the philosophy of the Academy and creates a sense of ownership in and responsibility to the organization in their students.

**The Board of Directors includes a student representative in recognition of the importance of the Academy to the organization.**

*"Board members treat the Academy as an equal program - it's not an appendage." -  
Springer Board Member*

When the Springer Opera House decided to involve Theatre Academy students in the organization, they did so on all levels, including on the Board of Directors. The institutional decision to include a student voice as part of the governing body of the organization speaks again to the central role that the Theatre Academy plays at the Springer Opera House. The students who serve the organization on the Board have an opportunity to use the skills developed at the Academy in a real life experience. Having an articulate and active student representative on the Board has also reinforced the value of the Theatre Academy to the adult Board members. Making decisions and implementing initiatives to build an awareness and support for the Theatre Academy has worked both ways. The current Board president became involved with the Springer Opera House years ago when his daughter began attending the Theatre Academy. This is one of the ways in which the Springer has built a community of highly invested and engaged families – parents and children – through the Theatre Academy.

**The Theatre Academy encourages parent involvement.**

*"It seems to me that the Academy and Ron and the staff make an incredible impact on a significant number of children and youth in this area – and it seems to me that that impact is positive, nurturing and growth enhancing and will carry forward into these young people's lives." - Academy parent*

Encouraging parent involvement is not a common decision in the implementation of a theatre education program. Most programs discourage parents from observing classes, out of a concern that students will not be completely present or focused if their parents are watching. But the Springer Opera House encourages parents to come and observe a class at any point in time. By inviting parents in, the Academy dissipates any tension or disconnection that parents may feel, and instead, builds their trust and support of the program. Parents often remarked that they know that their children are safe and cared for at the Springer. Involving the parents in the program creates a stronger sense of connection and community within the Academy and the Springer. Some parents stay involved even after their children leave the program, e.g., the current Board president. Parents see and experience their children's growth and development at the Springer, and they want that to continue for other children in their community.

**The Theatre Academy and Springer Opera House staff is capable and passionate and consistent.**

*"God Bless Ron, Amy, Paul and the Board" - Academy parent*

The Springer Opera House staff is highly committed to the success of the Theatre Academy as well as the organization. Ron Anderson's commitment to developing and fostering the philosophy of the Theatre Academy has spread throughout the staff of the Springer Opera House. Amy Bishop, the Education Coordinator who is responsible for Academy Administration, is a trusted liaison with parents and students. All of the Springer staff is knowledgeable about the program and what it offers the students and the community. The consistent and capable management of the

program reassures the parents and families that their children are valued at the Theatre Academy.

**The Springer Opera House took the time to develop the Theatre Academy program and the relationships around it.**

An early - and crucial - decision that the Springer made in the creation of the Theatre Academy was to take the time to develop the program. Instead of jumping into programming, the Springer Opera House was able to budget for an entire year's work to plan and develop the Academy's program. Ron spent a great deal of time networking within the education community, within the arts community and within the local community in order to create strong relationships and broad awareness. He clarified the philosophy of life skills through stage skills that guides the coursework, and he developed the challenge/acknowledgement structure. Having the resources and ability to take the time to create a strong foundation for an education program is extremely difficult for most theatre companies, which are often preoccupied with short term revenue needs from theatre classes. The long term potential impact of theatre education on organizational capacity and audience development is harder to see, but the Springer risked a year's salary and has netted a substantial return.

**The Theatre Academy's program and curriculum were developed deliberately.**

*"The curriculum emphasizes teamwork - making the whole unit strong" - Academy alumnus*

The Theatre Academy is the result of deliberate planning and development. Often, theatre education classes develop as the result of having a theatre artist in the company who has teaching experience. Unfortunately, programs that develop this way often do not have continuity or consistency. In contrast, the Springer Theatre Academy has gained a reputation for these very characteristics with their students and parents. Students know what to expect from their classes, teachers and classmates. Parents know the schedule, the staff and the expectations. Even though teachers may come and go over the years and new classes may rotate in to replace others, the program's foundations – the philosophy, the leadership, the structures – remain consistent. These grounding elements of the program also ensure that the quality of experience students, parents, teachers and others have at the Academy continues to meet and exceed their levels of expectation.

**The Director of the Theatre Academy looks for similar mindsets when hiring faculty members for the program.**

*"[I decided to re-enroll], because I love the program and the teachers!" - Academy student*

Teaching at the Springer Theatre Academy is a very demanding experience. Students of the Academy and the staff at the Springer have high expectations for the teachers in the program. Teachers have to be highly engaged and present with their students at every moment, seven hours a day, five days a week for eight weeks. Most of all, they must be aware of the overall concept and focus of the Academy, which is why Ron Anderson is very particular about who he hires to teach at the Academy. While training and teaching experience are important to have, he looks for people who share the same mindset that teaching stage skills is really about teaching life skills. When they are there teaching, they are living this philosophy. Since teaching at the Springer Theatre

Academy can be a very demanding experience, teachers often rotate out of the program every few years. After a few years, a teacher might ask or be invited to come back again. New teachers at the Academy are mentored by the experienced teachers. Over the eleven years of the Academy, the Director of the Academy has been able to create a list of rotating faculty, who share the philosophy of the Academy and have on-the-job training and experience.

**The Springer Opera House understands how to strategically use its historic building.**

*“The Springer is the most gorgeous and historical building I have ever been in.” - Academy student*

The Springer Opera House strategically uses its building in its marketing and programming, particularly with the Theatre Academy. While at the Theatre Academy, students develop a deep respect for the history and beauty of the building. For the students, the experience of working, playing and learning in such a rich and vibrant space is completely unique. The grand style of the hall must seem like something out of a film. As they grow to know the Springer, they learn about the history – the famous people who played the stage, the wrecking ball that almost destroyed the building in the 1960's, the people who continue the stories and performances today. When students speak about the Academy and being a part of the Springer community, they describe it as a way of saying thanks for the building, for keeping it alive for them.

**The Springer Opera House underwrites the transportation costs for schools and students to attend special matinee performances of Mainstage and Children's Theatre shows.**

*"The Springer pays for transportation, the ticket prices are not prohibitive, and there is a strong curriculum relationship. It's part of our students' quality of life." - Billy Kendall, Assistant Superintendent, Muscogee County Schools*

Some 15,000 youth in the Columbus area are introduced to the Springer Opera House through the 40-50 annual matinee performances for school groups. There was a time when the schools were not signing up to attend the matinees because of the cost of transportation to the Springer. When Paul Pierce discovered the reason behind the lack of attendance, and how little it cost to pay for the buses, the Springer's staff immediately decided that the Springer would cover that cost. On weekday mornings, the downtown community has grown accustomed to the sight of a dozen yellow buses unloading hundreds of students at the Springer's main entrance. The Springer's decision to underwrite the cost of the buses indicates the organization's overall dedication to exposing students to the theatre.

**The Springer Opera House's response to RiverCenter's potential competition was to develop a unique product.**

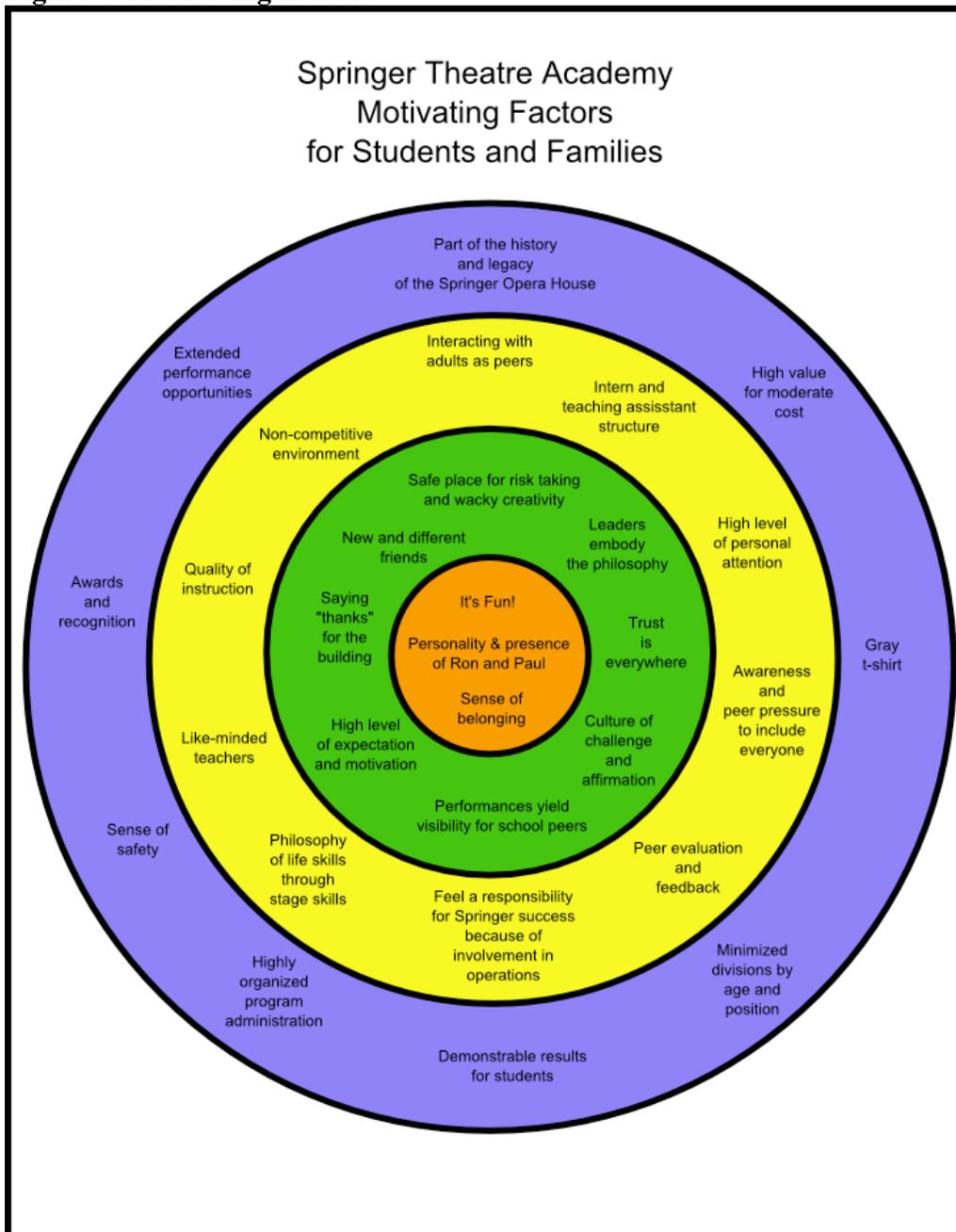
*"When the RiverCenter opened, the Springer refused to knuckle under. Instead, they developed very pragmatic programming that has helped them flourish." - Betsy Covington, Executive Director, Community Foundation of the Chattahoochee valley*

In 2000, the RiverCenter for the Performing Arts opened down the street from the Springer Opera House. The RiverCenter was a result of the Columbus Challenge, which also generated the funds to renovate the Springer Opera House. Instead of trying to out-do the RiverCenter in popular blockbuster hits, the Springer decided to focus on developing a unique relationship with its audience. The Academy is a central part of that relationship.

## Motivating Factors

In addition to identifying the Institutional Decisions made by the Springer Opera House, our research indicated that there are a number of Motivating Factors built into the Theatre Academy program that yield high levels of connection between students and the Academy. These motivating factors serve as examples of best practices in the field of theatre education. For our purposes, the factors have been organized by tiers, indicating the importance of that factor to the students' experience at the Academy, and therefore the impact that factor has on overall student connection to the Academy. Figure 3 is a visual representation of the tiers.

**Figure 3: Motivating Factors**



## 1<sup>st</sup> Tier (the Bulls Eye)

**It's Fun!** It may be straightforward, but having fun is a key to keeping youth interested and engaged. The Academy curriculum and classes are developed with this essential aspect in mind. Creating classes that teach unique and interesting skills like improvisation, clowning, tumbling, stilt walking, singing and dancing, ensures that students will have fun while participating in the Theatre Academy.

*“Lovely! [The Springer Theatre Academy] is fun, and I will be attending or helping as long as I can.” - Academy student*

*“[The Academy] offers exciting classes in which kids learn the fundamentals of the arts at varying levels **through fun experiences.**” - Academy parent*

*“It's a wonderful opportunity **to have fun** while learning aspects of theatre.” - Academy student*

*“[I re-enrolled] because **it's fun**, I love the teachers and students, and I learn a lot each class I take.” - Academy student*

**Students feel a sense of belonging.** At the Academy, students are encouraged to be themselves, whoever and whatever that means. Students' opinions are valued and sought out. They are seen and treated as important and interesting individuals. As a result, students report feeling a strong sense of belonging at the Springer Theatre Academy.

*“I feel like no matter what I do, **I belong there.** I don't have to worry what people think of me. Even when I do something embarrassing and everyone laughs, I know they are laughing at the mistake or the situation and not me.” - Academy student*

**Ron's and Paul's presence and personality create a positive, nurturing environment.** Ron and Paul have a remarkable dedication to the Theatre Academy and the students, and are consistently accessible to them. Students know who Ron and Paul are not merely by their names or titles; they see them in the halls and talking to them in or between classes, and some students work onstage and backstage with them. Both Ron and Paul, as leaders and mentors, are integral to the students' experiences at the Springer Academy Theatre. They consistently endeavor to lead by example.

*“I truly cannot imagine the program **being as phenomenal without Ron Anderson.** The kids adore and respect his wise, firm, but gentle guidance. I cannot name a finer role model.” - Academy parent*

*“They're always **teaching by example.** Paul fixes the sets if he sees they need fixing.” - Academy student*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Tier

**The Theatre Academy is a safe place for risk taking and wacky creativity.** The program's faculty and staff are very intentional in creating an environment that promotes exploration and creativity. Students experience a new freedom when they are no longer afraid of what people think. They gain confidence in themselves and the choices that they make.

*“My children are in a safe environment that **allows them to express themselves** without worrying that someone will tease them if they sing off key or forget a line.” - Academy parent*

*“[The Springer Theatre Academy is] a friendly place **to be creative, wacky and learn useful skills.**” - Academy student*

**Students make friends who are new and different, and who are supportive of one another.** Students come from different schools and neighborhoods, which facilitates meeting and interacting with new, interesting people. Because students at the Academy are in a supportive environment, they develop close, trusting relationships with each other that are the foundations of strong friendships.

*“The Springer is great. You meet lots of people who like to do the same things as you, and **make life long friends.**” - Academy student*

*“It was lots of fun! I also enjoyed **getting out of my comfort zone and making new friends.**” - Academy student*

**Students see Ron and Paul embody the philosophy of the Theatre Academy.** Ron and Paul's mutual belief in the philosophy of teaching life skills through stage skills resounds in the language they use and personal choices they make. As students observe and interact with Ron and Paul, they are able to experience what the philosophy of the Academy translates to in real, adult life.

*“There is no better way **to become acquainted with the theatre and the people that run it** than participating in this amazing program.” - Academy parent*

**Performance opportunities at the Springer Opera House yield visibility for students among school peers.** Only students in the Springer Theatre Academy have the opportunity to audition for roles in Springer Mainstage and Children's Theatre shows. Often, these shows are attended by youth in the area and by school groups for matinee performances. When a student is cast in a role, he/she will perform in front of their peers outside of the Academy giving them "celebrity" status at their schools and with their peers.

*“I would describe the Academy as **a pathway to the future** for any student serious about the performing arts.” - Academy parent*

*“[We re-enrolled because of] the evolving curriculum, the camaraderie, **the ability to audition for shows, and Ron & Amy (fabulous!).**” - Academy parent*

**Participating in the Theatre Academy is a way of saying “thanks” for preserving the building.** Students in the Theatre Academy develop an awareness and appreciation of the history and value of the Springer Opera House. They feel that their participation in the Academy, in part, continues the life and story of the Springer Opera House.

*"This **building inspires me**. I have a sense of owing this place so much, I love giving back to it." - Academy alumna*

*"Having the closing of the day **on stage at the Springer** [is important to me]." - Academy student*

**At the Theatre Academy, trust is everywhere.** Students trust their classmates, teachers and Academy staff. Parents trust the Academy staff and faculty. The Academy's staff trust their teachers and students. The teachers trust their students and interns. The deep, revolving trust at the Academy allows students to feel a responsibility for their actions and an ownership of their personal experiences at the Academy.

*"Excellent skills and loyalties are fostered. [My daughter] has **learned so much about trust and team[work]**. It's awesome!" - Academy parent*

*"Everyone is **encouraging and supportive**." - Academy parent*

**The Theatre Academy fosters a culture of affirmation and challenge.** Every day at the Theatre Academy begins with “challenges” and ends with “acknowledgements.” Classes at the Theatre Academy are hard. Students are asked to do difficult things, to stretch their bodies and their minds. In the end, the Academy always affirms the students' efforts, successes and struggles.

*"I love the effect it has on the children. **The self-confidence and ability to move through life situations blossoms**." - Academy parent*

*"There is room to fail - the show always closes - but **the people don't quit**." - Academy parent*

**There is a high level of expectation and motivation for students at the Springer Theatre Academy.** Therefore, learning perseverance is a key part of the Theatre Academy experience. Students learn to rise to the occasion and to persist in the face of obstacles.

*"**Never give up**." - Academy student*

*"Wonderful exposure to theatre, wonderful group building, team playing experience, **personally challenging for growth and confidence**." - Academy student*

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Tier

**Students interact with adults as peers.** At the Theatre Academy, students' ideas, actions and perspectives are taken seriously by their teachers and by Academy staff. Removing the hierarchical nature of the traditional learning experience allows students to develop mature relationships with their teachers and classmates.

*“It's a social experience. I have **a relationship with adults**, but I'm not intimidated by them.” - Academy student*

**Students feel a responsibility for the Springer Opera House's success because of their involvement in its operations.** As mentioned earlier, students are integrated into all aspects of the Springer's operations from having a student representative on the Board to encouraging them to work backstage for productions. The Academy students value having a wealth of opportunity to be involved with the organization.

*“A great local way for kids and teens to **learn more about the ways of the stage and theatre**, as well as a way **to be around actors who truly do this for a living**.” - Academy parent*

**The Springer Theatre Academy has a non-competitive and team oriented environment.** In theatre and life, people need to be able to constructively work together and support one another. The Springer emphasizes these skills in their classes and program. Students enjoy and appreciate the chance to learn and work in a new, communal way.

*“A great learning experience that shows my family that **no one person can do it on their own. Everyone is needed to create the best in us all**.” - Academy parent*

*“There is **an atmosphere of community and individual dignity**.” - Academy parent*

**The intern and teaching assistant structure gives students goals to work towards.** As Academy students progress through the program, they have the ability to become an intern while they are still in the program. After they leave and go to college, students have the chance to come back and work as teaching assistants with the teachers. Students see these interns and teaching assistants as role models and look forward to the time when they can become one.

*“We love the Springer and the kids think it's 'magical.' **They can't wait to be interns**.” - Academy parent*

**The Springer Theatre Academy is known for the quality of its instruction.** When students come to the Academy, they know to expect a high level of theatrical training. From word of mouth and the Springer's marketing efforts, the Theatre Academy is known as one of the best theatre education programs in the southeast.

*“The Springer Theatre Academy is **a professional experience** in a first class facility, **taught by experts**, and provided in a fun-filled environment.” - Academy parent*

*“Classic study at the Springer has benefited regular school study. **Techniques learned surpass those in high school drama and literature analysis.**” - Academy parent*

**The Theatre Academy faculty is made up of like-minded teachers who share the Academy's philosophy.** Faculty members at the Springer Theatre Academy teach more than theatre skills in their classes. They are highly engaged individuals who care about their students' development as people as much as their development as performers. The students appreciate the challenging and supportive environment that their teachers create for them.

*"This is a very structured teaching environment. **The collaboration among teachers provides a consistency of practice from the Academy to the stage work. The teaching never stops.**" - Academy teacher*

*“Mrs. Bishop is **important to us.**” - Academy parent*

**The Theatre Academy promotes an awareness and peer pressure to include everyone.** If a student sees another student who looks left out or uncomfortable, he/she is encouraged to go and talk to that student. The program purposely invites students to create a consciousness of others and their experiences. At the Springer Theatre Academy, shyness and awkwardness are overcome by the students themselves in positive and proactive ways.

*“Everyone is **encouraging and supportive.**” - Academy student*

**Students and parents connect to the philosophy of "life skills through stage skills."** There is an appreciation that the skills developed at the Theatre Academy will translate into real life. Students know that, even if they do not pursue the theatre, their time at the Springer is well spent. The parents often speak of observing how their child grows and develops self-confidence and self-esteem through participating in the program.

*“A wonderful experience for kids and teens **to express their individuality and gain self-confidence and self-esteem while having fun.**” - Academy parent*

*“The Academy is a thrilling introduction to the theatre and is **a fantastic tool in learning life skills.**” - Academy parent*

**Students receive peer evaluation and feedback.** Academy curriculum and classes are structured to emphasize student participation. Students offer each other their insights and observations of each other. Students know that they have a valued voice and perspective at the Springer Theatre Academy.

*“The Springer Theatre Academy is a great experience **both technically and socially.**” - Academy parent*

**Students receive a high level of personal attention.** Classes are kept small so that teachers, teaching assistants and interns can get to know all of their students personally. Ron and Amy get

to know all of the students and their families as they return year after year. Students know they are viewed as an individual at the Springer Theatre Academy, not as a class or year.

*“The Springer Academy **creates successes**, thus boosting self-esteem in children and young adults.” - Academy parent*

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Tier**

**Students receive awards and recognition.** Throughout the Academy summer camp and fall/winter classes, students receive verbal acknowledgment from their teachers and peers. At the end of a session, the students attend an awards banquet where some students are recognized for their outstanding achievements as participants of the Theatre Academy. It is important to note that, though everyone does not get an award, the Academy students celebrate the successes of their peers without jealousy or envy.

*“The seasonal **awards banquet** is important to me.” - Academy student*

**Parents and students know they are safe at the Theatre Academy.** Students and their parents know that the Theatre Academy staff and faculty care about them. The Springer Academy Theatre provides for their students' physical, mental and emotional safety all in one.

*“It's like **a home away from home**; everyone is so friendly and what you learn is always fun.” - Academy student*

*“Involvement with the Springer Theatre Academy is a terrific opportunity for children of all ages to enhance their self expression with **a safe and supported environment**.” - Academy parent*

*“The Springer is a truly awesome place to be. It's a good way to keep kids my age, younger and older **out of trouble and into the arts**.” - Academy student*

**Students have extended performance opportunities.** When Academy students perform in a Springer Mainstage or Children's Theatre production, they do an entire four week run. In contrast to high school or college productions that only span a weekend or two, the Springer offers an authentic, professional performing experience for their students.

*“Performing at the Springer **provides a working theatre experience**, more than a college production does. At the Springer, they perform 20 times, and learn the value of repetition.” - Academy parent*

**The Theatre Academy provides demonstrable results for students and parents.** Students gain new skills, from the outrageous -- stilt walking or stage fighting -- to others more applicable to their everyday lives: articulation or improvisation skills. Parents watch their children become more confident, outgoing and disciplined. The student's growth and the impact it makes is visible to everyone.

*“It **makes our family's life stronger, richer and closer**. We've seen nothing like it anywhere.” - Academy parent*

*“Unprecedented excellence in instruction and **obvious growth seen in my child.**” - Academy parent*

*“As a parent, I have seen **the evolution of my child's maturity** with the Academy. The Academy has become a summer event that we cannot miss!” - Academy parent*

**The Theatre Academy minimizes divisions by age and position.** While students are grouped into classes by age group, the students are not isolated from each other. The interns, teaching assistants and teachers themselves also engage with the students outside of the classroom. There is a real sense that everyone is part of a large community at the Springer Theatre Academy.

*“Awards at the banquet **go to the youngest students, too.**” - Academy student*

*“The Academy **diminishes age differences.** Kids see that they have **peers of all ages.**” - Academy parent*

**The Theatre Academy is highly organized by the program's administration.** Unlike what parents and students often experience in school situations, there are no surprises at the Springer Academy Theatre. They know what to do, what is expected of families, and what to expect from the program, which is reassuring for all parties involved.

*“The Academy is very organized. The **scheduling is clear** and there are **minimal surprises.**” - Academy parent*

**Students get a gray t-shirt.** While most camps and programs give their participants t-shirts as uniforms and mementos, there is a certain amount of pride that students have about wearing their Springer Theatre Academy shirts. They are part of a well-known and respected arts and theatre education program, and they have good reason to be proud.

*“What about **the gray t-shirts?**” - Ron Anderson*

**The Theatre Academy is a high value for a moderate cost.** The reasonable cost of the program allows students to consistently attend classes and the summer camp year after year. Scholarships are provided to ensure access for students from low income homes.

*“The **cost is important to get multiple children involved.**” - Academy parent*

**The students are part of the history and legacy of the Springer Opera House.** To a certain extent, there is an awareness in the students that, by participating in the Springer Theatre Academy, they are becoming part of the historical legacy of the building. They become part of a story that has been central to their community and city for over a hundred years and that will continue, in part because of them, for another hundred in the future.

*“We have conversations where we say **'I want to have something like this for my kids!'**” - Academy student*

## Implications for the Field

The Springer Academy Theatre stands as a model of how educational programming can have a deep impact on all aspects of a theatre organization. In order for this model to have implications for the field and impacts that are comparable to those seen at the Springer, there needs to be a shift in how theatre education programs and classes are perceived within the community of professional theatre companies.

First, theatre education programs and classes cannot be viewed as secondary. They must become central to the organization's artistic vision and operations. Theatre education programs need to be developed with intention and planning, to create an engaging and purposeful curriculum. Educating youth and interesting them in the theatre does not have to solely be about creating future actors and actresses, but instead can be about creating a new generation of educated, engaged theatre patrons and supporters. As one participant in the interviews stated, "art is how you change things without people realizing it."

Second, and deeply connected to the first, theatre education must be about developing a learning community. The leadership of the organization must be invested and committed to the program. The staff has to be aware and engaged. Parent involvement develops trust and understanding about the program. The students have to be welcomed and involved in the organization, not only the classes that they are in. And the board needs to be invested in the program. As these personal connections are made, a community develops that is deeply connected to the mission and vision of the organization and that will go out of its way to support and participate in the organization's activities.

Former Columbus Mayor Bob Poydasheff stated during an interview, "The arts are the soul of a community. That's how you grow. This makes us civilized." Columbus, as the fastest growing metro area in the state of Georgia, has a great potential to keep and enrich its community soul through the innovative artistic education taking place at the Springer Opera House. Other theatre companies might do well to learn from this example.