Maryland Summer Center for the Arts

Summer Arts Youth Program Returns

July 2011 marked the return of the Maryland Summer Center for the Arts (MSCA) following a one-year hiatus. Ninety-two young artists and performers gathered at Salisbury University for a two-week arts education program, providing talented middle and high school students across the state with an opportunity to study visual arts, music, musical theatre, digital video production and acting. In addition to taking classes in their chosen disciplines, the students went on field trips and attended workshops and performances by guest artists including the Shizumi Dance Theatre of Japan and storyteller Noa Baum. Field trips included the Shakespeare Theatre and Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., and the Baltimore Museum of Art, among others.

The program is extremely competitive; students must audition for the chance to work with dedicated artists/teachers and other professionals. In 2011, approximately 200 students from around the state auditioned for a chance to take part in the program. The students who participated attended five to six hours of class each day and lived on campus in a small-group, community-centered environment.

The students came to develop their talents and showcase their work. Students from all socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities, kids from rural areas, small towns and big cities all came together to sharpen their skills, make new friends, learn, grow and have fun. Although most students were from Baltimore, Washington and the surrounding areas, some traveled a great distance in order to participate. “We had one student who came all the way from Allegany County, which is in the northwestern corner of Maryland – about as far from the Eastern Shore as you can get,” said Robert Smith, SU theatre professor and program director.

Smith, who has served as the program’s director since 2001, is a long-time veteran of the Summer Center program. He first became involved in the program in 1978. Similar programs have existed throughout the state for the past 40 years.

This year, the program was sponsored by funding from SU, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and donations from individuals – some of whom were parents of Summer Center students. The program was placed on hiatus in 2010 as a result of massive budget cuts to state-funded programs. “Losing funding in 2010 was devastating for all of us – faculty, staff, counselors and students,” commented Smith. “This year there were more scholarship applicants than ever before – people who truly deserved to be in the program but could not afford the costs. Many students came from families facing financial hardships – some parents had recently lost their jobs.”

“It was truly remarkable that all of our staff returned this year after the 2010 hiatus. This speaks volumes about the dedication and passion of those who are involved,” said Smith. Some Summer Center students kept in touch with Smith during the hiatus as well. He received numerous e-mails from students thanking him and his staff for such a rewarding experience. Many were elated at the prospect of participating in the 2011 program. In an exuberant e-mail to Smith, one three-year Summer Center veteran
wrote: “I literally jumped up, spun in circles and then cried because I was so excited.”

More than half the participating students return for two or more seasons. Many start in seventh grade and stay through the end of their senior year in high school. Some even return as counselors and later as instructors. “It is very rewarding to see them grow from awkward middle school students into sophisticated young adult artists ready to begin their college careers,” said Smith.

Although there were fewer students on campus than in previous years, Smith and his colleagues saw this as both a challenge and an opportunity. “The orchestra only had 30 members this year instead of the usual 60, so we couldn’t do some of the full orchestral arrangements we had done in previous years,” explained Smith. “On the other hand, the smaller number of students meant that each participant received more individual attention from the instructors. Also, the smaller ensemble enabled us to do some more chamber orchestra arrangements, only with a much fuller sound. We were able to do some really creative, challenging things with the orchestra students.”

One of the unique aspects of the MSCA is the close friendships the students forge during the intense two-week session. “They form very strong bonds with each other,” said Smith. “They are together for only two weeks, but many remain friends for years,” he added. One group of participants has even created a Summer Center Facebook page to help alumni stay in touch.

The Summer Center program offers participants numerous opportunities to perform publicly and showcase their work for each other and the community. This year, the program partnered with Barnes and Noble Booksellers in Salisbury. Students of acting, music theatre and orchestra had the chance to give live, in-store performances during the course of the two-week session’s Outreach Initiative. The orchestra students also performed at the Baltimore Museum of Art Sculpture Garden and the Inner Harbor.

Smith commented that the experience is transforming for just about all who participate. For many middle school students, this is their first experience away from home. In addition to developing their skills as artists, they must also learn how to cope on their own and get along in a community living environment. They also develop practical living skills such as doing their own laundry and making healthy eating choices. “For some, this is also the first time they are with so many other students who share their passions. In their home town or school, they may be considered unique or odd, but here, they are part of a supportive community of fellow artists,” said Smith. “The program is about the journey – the process of learning, not so much an end result,” said Smith. The students don’t work toward one final production at the end. Rather, they have the opportunity to learn new skills and methodologies, practice what they learn, take risks, and try out new ideas. “It’s a safe yet challenging environment where we encourage them to take risks and even if they fail, it’s okay because they have grown and learned so much in the process,” said Smith. He added: “Having worked with this program for so long, I’ve seen how transforming the experience is for kids. That is what keeps me coming back year after year.”