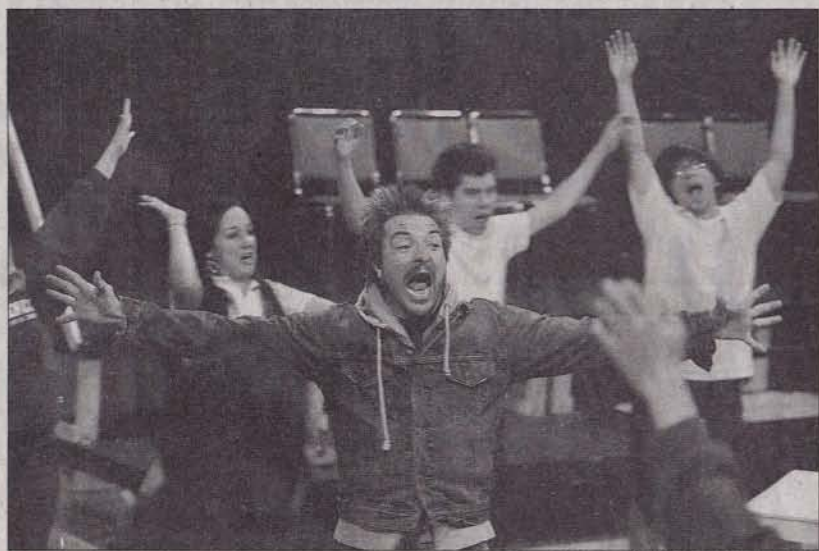


CALIFORNIA



Photographs by GARY FRIEDMAN Los Angeles Times

ENTERTAINER: Jeremy Kent Jackson, who has appeared on TV and co-owns a company that provides youth theater education programs, was hired by Providence High School to teach a theater arts curriculum.

A creative search pays off

Burbank Catholic school revitalizes its drama program — and saves money — by outsourcing teaching positions to professional actors.

NICOLE SANTA CRUZ

When Providence High School had openings for a drama and choir teacher this fall, administrators got creative: They outsourced.

Due to declining enrollment, the Burbank Catholic high school couldn't afford to hire two instructors at its usual teaching salary, so they hired two actors to teach a full theater arts curriculum at a fraction of the cost.

The professional actors have revitalized the school's drama program, and school leaders say the idea could be a viable option for other financially strapped schools looking to maintain programs that are in financial jeopardy.

"It's a bargain," said Michele Schulte, the school's principal, adding that the actors have been a hit. "This is their passion, teaching children to perform."

The actors, Jeremy Kent Jackson and Dominic Catrambone, co-own DiscoveryOnstage, a company that provides youth theater education programs.

This is their first foray into running a school's drama department and simultaneously producing a play.

"It feels like I'm doing something important every day," Jackson said.

About 22 students meet Monday through Thursday at 7 a.m. for an extra-period drama class. Two to three times a week, students rehearse after school for their upcoming production of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town."

Jackson, 36, and Catrambone, 33, who are easygoing and seem to get along well with the teenagers, have had varied acting careers. Jackson was most recently featured as the man with tiny hands in Burger King commercials and has guest-starred on television's "Without a Trace" and "CSI." Catrambone has performed in dozens of independent short films and music videos and is a voice-over artist. He's the voice of Ziecam and Chevron's ExtraMile radio campaign.

Catrambone said he and his partner sometimes wonder how they became high school teachers.

"We actually grade... when we remember," Catrambone joked.

This isn't the first time the duo has worked in a school. For three years, DiscoveryOnstage worked in the Monrovia Unified School District's af-



LEARNING: Students Paolo Ang and Jessica DiCola rehearse Friday for the school's upcoming production of "Our Town."

ter-school program. Last fall, Jackson and Catrambone coordinated Shakespeare and fencing classes, said Patrick Garcia, who oversees the programs. But budget cuts forced Garcia to end those classes.

"The reason that they aren't working with us right now is strictly financial," he said.

Marvin Reynolds, executive director of the National Assn. of Private Schools, which oversees about 155 schools, said outsourcing could be a good plan. "I haven't heard of it before," he said.

Tom Guttry, whose daughter, Cattie, 15, is playing Emily in the Providence play, said instructors should have a background in what they're teaching.

"I don't think it's any different than if schools hire walk-on coaches for sports teams," said Guttry, who intro-

duced the duo to Schulte. "It's not really any different for theater."

Before Jackson and Catrambone came to Providence, the drama department was "sporadic," said Barry Samson, parent of Chanel, 15, who is playing Mrs. Gibbs. His older daughter, Grace, graduated from Providence and participated in school plays.

"Up until this year, we didn't have a really dedicated drama department. It was more like a club," he said.

Samson said the success of the plays depended on parents.

"It was good, but it was struggling," he said.

The 440-student school bases its number of staff members on the student population. Like many other private and public schools, enrollment has dropped. In the past year, enrollment dipped by about 70 students, causing Schulte to drop five staff members.

At Providence, an instructor makes an average of \$50,000 to \$55,000 a year, plus benefits, and DiscoveryOnstage's contract is for about \$25,000, Schulte said.

"It's a good deal for our money," she said.

Annual tuition at the four-year high school is \$9,900, including books, according to the school's website.

On a recent afternoon, the school auditorium smelled faintly of paint and wood from the new stage the students and parents built in the middle of the room to give the audience a more intimate theater experience.

Students practiced without props. Paolo Ang, 17, and Cattie Guttry walked around the rectangular stage. Paolo, armed with a toothpick in his mouth, was trying to play hard-to-get.

Jackson looked on with a notebook and a pen, pensively eyeing the students and scribbling notes.

"You're more puppy dog than tough guy," Jackson told Paolo.

Jackson walked down to the stage to give Paolo some acting tips.

"If there's an animal stalking you, the number one thing you want to do is keep your eyes on it," he told him.

Moments later, Paolo heeded Jackson's advice. Jackson smiled.

"I'm so gleeful," Jackson said proudly. "That means happy in geek language."

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