

Young actors join forces

By JOHN LITTMER

The way Ron Merkin keeps talking about "breaking down barriers," you'd think he was in the demolition business.

But Merkin's business is Center Ring Productions, a children's theater company. And the barriers he's talking about are the ones children build around themselves as they grow up for the purpose of being "cool."

Merkin, who is 23 and lives in West Bloomfield, does shows of the audience-participation variety. All of the shows are based on the theme of imagination.

The children in the audience come up on stage and pretend to be different types of people, or machines, or anything else that appears in everyday life.

This is like a slice-of-life for the kids," he said.

The barriers come up when Merkin or another member of his college-age company invites a child onto the stage.

"Some of them are shy, but once they get up there, they realize it's fun to be

there and it's fun to pretend," Merkin said.

MERKIN HAS HAD AN EXTENSIVE amount of experience in the theater, despite his youth. He has been involved in children's theater for the past six years and has been acting since he was 11.

He has taught at Harper City & Country School in Bloomfield Hills and St. Mary's of Orchard Lake, a liberal arts college. Merkin is a senior in the theater department of the University of Detroit-Marygrove.

He started Center Ring Productions last November because "I didn't like the way children's theater was being handled."

There's too much violence. If you notice, the cartoons on TV are vastly different than five years ago. The themes are all violence.

Another one of Merkin's favorite words is control. While his shows are mostly improvisational, there is a loose script which is carefully designed.

"I have written in where the kids get involved, where they reach their peak," he said. "When they reach their peak, I bring them down with a song. When they reach the second peak, I bring them down a little bit, then the show ends."

"It's very controlled for our part, but for the kids it's totally spontaneous."

MERKIN'S AUDIENCES range in age from three to 13. "In each audience, there will be a smattering of each age," he said. Getting these varied age groups involved in the show would seem impossible.

"Once they reach the age of 11 or 12, they like to show off and they've started to realize that other people are watching them all the time," Merkin agrees.

But, if you can get them on stage, if you can get past that barrier, you've got a person who really wants to do it.

Once the child reaches the stage, "We assess the child immediately," Merkin said. "Part of an actor's training is being sensitive to other people. Each person that gets up on that stage is treated as an individual and not as just another person."

"I never talk down to kids," he added. "You've got to respect them for what they are. They're intelligent human beings, and they're easy to mislead."

THEY'RE ALSO CANDID. "Since the kid is younger and has fewer barriers, he'll tell you if he doesn't like the show," Merkin said. "But if he likes it, he will tell you. They're the best critics in the world."

Merkin estimates that 85 per cent of his work is improvisational. He has done shows for Holiday Inns of America and the J.L. Hudson Co. and did a television show for WXYZ-TV.

He is also working with Pierre Turgon on a stage adaptation of Detroit News columnist Charles Marcus's book, "The Patch on Santa's Flank," and does an occasional birthday party.

Merkin's shows are guaranteed to produce smiles. Kids have been trained to raise their hands for everything, and that's wrong," he said. "I tell them to put down their hands and I want to see the biggest smile."

The person who has the biggest smile is going to help me.



Merkin (left) clowning with Bob Beaupre

Tickets available

Tickets are still available for West Bloomfield Symphony Orchestra's Friday concert at Ford Auditorium in Detroit.

The concert is part of Detroit's "Homecoming" program, which also includes a performance by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

Tickets for the West Bloomfield orchestra's concert, which begins at 8:30 p.m., are available at Hudson's, Ford Auditorium and Massie Temple. They range

from \$5 to \$12.50, including an afterglow. In addition, French Stralton of the co-sponsoring Bloomfield Chapter of West Bloomfield is offering a special dinner-and-boat-trip package to the concert. For information, call 626-1897.

The concert will be highlighted by David VanDette's "Jazz Synthesis" featuring John Trudell on trumpet.

Proceeds will go to the Detroit Zoo and Detroit Council for the Arts.

Art fair set by Y

Plans are under way for a big art fair and craft show to be held at Northwest Branch YWCA, 2804 Grand River, on Sunday, Sept. 12 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Local and regional artists will display and sell their wares, including pottery, stained glass, macramé, folk art, pants

and sculptures, glass blowers, welding, and crafters, jewelry, quilts, and cellulose crafts.

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