



Students staff their own Old Time Radio sounds at North Elementary this week. Eli Kollarmayer, right, makes a electronic



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'Don't touch that dial': North Elementary students bring history to life in new (old) way

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MORGANTOWN — Return with us now, as the old-time radio announcers used to say, to the thrilling days of yesteryear.

You know: This past Thursday, in the gym at North Elementary School.

Which was when and where the heroic tale of Lewis and Clark was recast into a screwball comedy worthy of any 1930s radio show.

In this version, the hapless explorers still meet up with Sacagawea, the wise Shoshone woman, fluent in English, who kept them to task.

Trouble is, the intrepid explorers, in this telling, were prone to gaffes and unintentional slapstick.

Try as they might, they just couldn't stay out of trouble.

At one point, they annoyed Sacagawea's already grumpy feline — Catagawea — who tore off after them while they bolted for their very lives.

Malia Gabby, a real-life North Elementary student who was an integral part of the cast, couldn't help grinning as she used bottle caps and pebbles to supply the "running" sound effects.

"That really worked in there," she said.

But don't touch that dial — those announcers used to say that, too — because we're getting ahead of the narrative.

Radio days

While it definitely wasn't "yesteryear" on that rainy afternoon last week at the school on Chestnut Ridge Road, it was still as close as it gets to an American art form that morphed from vaudeville and held on, right up to the days of kinescope television.

And the wielders of all this audio magic this day at North were a group of youngsters in the digital domain who



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“You’ve got 21st century kids, old-time radio and a cool way to give a history lesson. How could you not go with that?”

Pennington is not an old-time announcer. She’s a present-day educator at North, where she teaches 5th grade.

She linked with Sarah Rummel, a fellow teacher, and the pair applied for the Benedum Foundation grant that brought the Bricolage Production Co. down from Pittsburgh for the proceedings.



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Bricolage — it gets its name from the French term of the same, meaning the cobbling together of art using everyday objects — is a performance troupe known for its staging of plays and other activities in the style of those radio shows.

Radio was inevitable, said Sam Turich, the company's educational director, who made the trip down to the school in Morgantown.

"You have to remember that Pittsburgh's the home of KDKA, the country's first radio station," he told the North audience.

That was in 1920 when radio was a revolution.

By 1930, just a decade later, the medium was firmly entrenched across the country, with Philco and Zenith tabletops and Crosley consoles gracing homes even where the Depression had yanked most, if not all, of the other creature comforts away.

Meanwhile, the troupe's educational component travels mostly to schools in the Pittsburgh area for endeavors such as the above.

"This is our first time in West Virginia," Turich said.

Call it a radio-themed residency, he said.

Students write rudimentary radio scripts which are then polished by a playwright on staff at Bricolage.

They can be comedies, science fiction, westerns or excursions into horror, but there is a caveat of scholarship to all this creativity: They also have to broadcast actual historic facts to make the cut.

The above automatically meant a five-star review from Natalie Webb, North's principal.

"Our kids are writing and they're acting and they're really learning the material," she said.

"They're having fun. They won't forget this. I'm just so impressed that so many intellectual elements are being brought in."

Acting, N'at

Meanwhile, the Lewis and Clark comedy was one of five productions at her school that day, each lasting around 15 minutes and recorded by the school for posterity.

Joining Turich, a Pittsburgh native who studied acting at Columbia University, was another voice actress, a music director who played keyboards for productions, and various other technicians who were also part of the traveling roadshow.



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Those are the productions that give a loving, laughing wink and a nod to the place where people cheer on the *Stillers*, while hitting Giant *Iggle* after the game for groceries, since it's right on the way.

For example, there's "Night of Living Dead N'at," their take on Pittsburgh native George Romero's landmark zombie flick, with Bricolage players doing the dialogue exclusively in the region's distinct dialect.

Same for Charles Dickens and "Yinz are Scrooged." Think Pittsburgh Dad — with an English Lit degree.

At North, you had microphones for the actors and an array of homemade contraptions for the sound enhancements — wondrous, sonic bric-a-brac that gave an earful to the eye-ful.

Cellophane, for the crackling fireplace effects.

A pair of gloves smacked together — a bird, taking flight.

And a trio of working, wooden doors. (You know, for the coveted, working wooden door effect.)

'I can't wait to hear the playback'

Even in Hollywood's CGI world, variations of the above implements are still being used in editing rooms, Turich said.

Other things are timeless, as well.

Such as spontaneity during the audition.

North fifth-grader Alexander Flanagan tapped a radio voice he didn't know he had, for example, garnering laughs and a role.

He was the "announcer" during the commercial that hit in the middle of the Lewis and Clark production: "Are you tragically incompetent? Then get yourself down to Adventure Superstore."

The kid with the pipes doesn't know if he'll get himself into an actors' studio one day. He just knows he had immense fun — and hit that "Applause" sign, if you please, good sir.

"I can't wait to hear the playback."

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Eli Kellermeyer makes a walk down the hallway sound from the Old Time Radio Show at North Elementary.



Sam Turich of Bricolage Production Co. of Pittsburgs introduces students at North Elementary for the old time radio they staffed.



Many sounds were made at the Old Time Radio Show at North Elementary, such as a ticking clock sound.



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