



The creative costuming efforts made by the staff at AGT include using duct tape and household objects.

By Sara Jane Smith

The knight makes her way by the light of the harvest moon across the pasture. Her mission is on her mind. She was told that the wise man on the hill held the answers. And she was warned of the possible danger that lay in her path. A shadow falls across her face and her enemy appears before her. Swords are drawn and a battle ensues. The moon catches the knight's sword and shines in her eyes, blinding her. The enemy plunges his sword into her side. The knight falls to the ground, gasping. The pasture is silent. Without a word, the enemy kneels down and pulls the knight to her feet. They embrace. A horn sounds, announcing dinner. They run to join the other teens for lasagna. Soon they will crawl into their sleeping bags and talk themselves to sleep.

Such is the life of an adventurer.

Adventure Game Theatre is a non-profit organization which offers workshops for teens aged twelve to eighteen who are interested in exploring new ways of learning through play. While most of their workshops are geared towards teen-agers, they occasionally offer workshops for adults.

### Theater and fantasy

In a recent interview, Ian Kaiser, AGT manager, said, "Adventure Game Theatre is a combination of different elements. We incorporate improvisational theater, fantasy role-playing and character development. What we do is really about helping people enter into a fantasy experience."

AGT offers five-day introductory programs, as well as 10- and 12-day advanced sessions. The introductory sessions offer participants the opportunity to learn lessons of safety, cooperation and the basics of improvisational theater.

Kaiser explains, "The five-day introductory program begins the first day with introductions and a series of games are played to acquaint the participants. We do swordplay with soft foam swords and teach people how to act out their wounds. We start off teaching them the swordplay and we go from that into the rules of the game. Everything we do is on the honor system. If a participant gets hit, it is up to that person to act out the wound as they imagined it happened. It's a non-competitive dance."

### Swordplay

Parents need not get nervous. Howard Moody, AGT founder and director, explained in a press release, "Combat with foam swords is one of the most fascinating and controversial ele-

# Magic comes to life

## Adventure Game Theatre offers mythic play



A young fairy smiles in the sun.

ments of AGT.

"We find that the use of playful, theatrical swordplay in an experiential learning environment actually gives young people a heightened sense of responsibility and connection, provides a positive outlet for aggressive drives, and allows us to address issues of and alternatives to real violence."

Kaiser continued, "The core values we instill dealing with cooperation help people to let go of themselves. We have a magical system. People have to learn how to respond to having a spell cast on them and what to do when a healer comes up to them and rings a bell and heals them of their wounds."

"When we enter into the story on Wednesday night, everyone has a good basis on their character. There are two kinds of people in the actual story — the playing characters are the kids that go on the adventure, everything happens to them and for them. And then there are the storyplaying characters, the people that the kids go out and interact with. Such as the wise

man sitting up on the hill with the magical amulet — the playing characters would go to him and fulfill the means of the story.

“We give them a very loose story line, for example, the Mardikans are invading and you have to save your land. We work with the playing characters to choose their own character names and backgrounds. We have found it is much more meaningful to them when they have the freedom to make that up themselves. With the storyplaying characters, we usually have a small blurb on each character telling them information such as, ‘a group of adventurers will come to you and you should do this.’ But there is immense freedom for the kids in the story to create their own characters and make their own decisions.

“Once the story starts, it just goes. And whatever happens, happens. Often things go very differently than we had said on paper. So we just incorporate that into a new story line. Often there are story playing characters running around communicating and planning things all the time.

“Thursday afternoon we finish the story and clean up. Thursday night we have a bardic circle. We all sit around and tell stories about the game or anything at all. We sing songs and people share their gifts and talents with each other. Seeing everybody’s creativity in that forum is wonderful.”

Most of the workshops are for teen-agers, some for adults and once in a while there is a workshop for both, with unexpected results.

“At a three day workshop that mixed children and adults, the adults said the experience opened their eyes to what teen-agers have to say and do in the world. They were impressed with playing with the teens on that level, they saw them in a whole new light,” Kaiser said.

He continued, “AGT touches people on an interesting level. After you spend the day pretending to be someone else and you come together and share the experience, you can see yourself and each other in a whole new way. We try not to claim that we can do anything for anyone, but the feedback we get makes me feel it is a really deep experience.”

#### **Building confidence**

Barbara Haugen, the minister of the Unitarian Univer-



**A diverse group of people, young and old, short and tall, participate in the games.**

salist Church of Pittsfield, sent her daughter, Susannah Tobin to the five-day introductory program at Adventure Game Theatre last summer to build her confidence before entering high school.

The camp was a success.

Haugen says, “The people that run the camp genuinely like the kids they are working with and want them to have a fun and positive experience. There are values at the foundation of the program regarding respect and furthering of individuality within community.

“When Susannah returned someone asked her to rate the experience on a scale of one to 10. She said ‘It was a 10!’ There is too much free time at other camps. Adventure Game Theatre provides enough structure to make it worth the money. She wasn’t just sitting around all week.

“Susannah walked a little taller when she got back. She has made a gentle transition into high school and is at peace with herself.”

Kaiser said, “There is something about that aspect of being with people totally immersed in play ... our society does not play enough these days. And the only idea of

play that we do have is organized sports which are highly competitive. So just getting a large group of people together to play a pretend game and experience being characters and going on quests is very archetypal.

“I think people see a lot more of themselves. By putting aside who they are in every day life and acting out a part of someone else and then coming back to themselves later they get a better idea of who they are. They get to bond with the other kids on a much deeper level than they can in every day interactions. Everyone has a certain level of barriers and fears they put up between themselves and other people in the world, and I see what we are doing as breaking down a lot of that and helping people in a very non-invasive way to move past some of the defenses they’ve created and connect with other people.

“Play is important. We do a lot of exercises that get people into their bodies and playing with each other without having to worry about how silly they look or how they are being judged. People just allow themselves to have an excellent time.

“We are trying to awaken the myth in people’s minds and hearts. Reading about myth is a great thing but when you can actually go out there and physically embody the myth that is truly amazing.”

#### **The logistics**

Founded by Howard Moody and Brian Allison in the early 1980s, Adventure Game Theatre ran its first youth program at Omega Institute for Holistic Studies in Rhinebeck, N.Y. in 1985. Since then they have offered programs throughout the Hudson Valley and surrounding areas.

The staff of AGT have large scale plans for the organization. Plans that could change our idea of schooling, Kaiser says. “Our work is leading up the establishment of our own site. A place where we can do AGT and offer learning experiences through play. Sort of a school for play and learning. Learning is very important. There are more fun and playful ways to learn what you need to know in your daily life without putting all the problems into it.”

This summer, Adventure Game Theatre was held at Omega Institute and also at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., Earthdance in Plainfield, Mass., Morgan Hill Farm, South Woodstock, Vermont and the Center for Symbolic Studies, New Paltz, N.Y.

AGT holds programs throughout the year and special programs can be arranged. For information, call 413-243-0015 or 1-888-792-PLAY or visit their website at <www.agt.org>. Their e-mail address is <info@agt.org>.

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**Swordplay is conducted with foam swords.**