

Adventuring they go



Adventure Game Theater campers embark on Part II of their improvisational story about fairies and dark elves in conflict.



Freeman Photos by Bonnie Langston

Adventure Game Theatre campers spend week playing out improvised quest.

By **BONNIE LANGSTON**
Freeman staff

James VanLeuvan seemed farther removed from his Kingston home than he actually was as he prepared for yet another day at Adventure Game Theatre camp near Belleayre Ski Center in High Mount.

He also seemed to relish the feeling. Dressed in a blue cloak and armed with shield and foam sword, the 13-year-old camper readied to resume a battle that started the day before and ended at night in woods surrounding Wildacres Hotel.

"It was exciting. Sometimes dark elves would pop out of nowhere and scare you, like over there in the high grass," the boy said, motioning toward an open field with a backdrop of forest, mountains, sunshine and blue skies.

VanLeuvan was among other campers ages 12 to 18 taking part in the week's activities, playing out quests and mystical encounters from a story line that campers created themselves. Through improvisational theater, the non-profit camp, founded in 1985, fosters creativity, community and self-awareness, according to one of its creators, Howard Moody.

MOODY, who trained with the New Games Foundation, Project Adventure and other programs, joined forces with Brian Allison, who has been an athlete and teacher of children with special needs, to create Adventure Game Theatre.

The two wanted to advance a playful point of view toward life, one that downplays competition and scarcity and promotes a spirit of abundance through creativity, Moody said. "We had no idea what this would become," he said, "when we started it."

SINCE its inception, the improvisational program, which Moody calls a "fascinating blend of safety and excitement" has been featured on the Public Broadcasting Service as well as Mothering Magazine and other publications. And it will return for its 13th year to the site that fostered its beginnings, Omega Institute, a holistic arts-and-education center at Rhinebeck.

Since the birth of Adventure Game Theater, the appeal of real-live participation in fantasy stories has been gaining.

"If you went on the computer and punched



'live action role-playing,'" Moody said, "you would get all kinds of sites all over the world."

YOUTH in the area, however, need not seek opportunities afar. Advanced sessions through Adventure Game Theatre begin July 24th and continue through Aug. 4 at the Wildacres location. Then, in addition to sessions Aug. 9 through 13 at Omega Institute - which invites adults as well - introductory weeks are scheduled Aug. 14 through 18 and Aug. 21 through 27, both at Stone Mountain Farm in New Paltz.

About 800 campers have attended Adventure Game Theater since it began, and during that time only one or two have dropped out, Moody said, one finding the experience "too intense."

Many campers return again and again, strengthening old friendships and making new ones. Mike Phelan, for instance, attended his first camp at Omega when he was 10. Now, at 20, and several camping experiences later; he is a member of the paid staff, along with two friends from that first experience.

PHELAN, from Long Island, said Adventure Game Theatre offered him a non-pressured opportunity to pursue his theatrical interests and to socialize with people who enjoy imaginative games.

"We could just play, get away and not worry about our image," he said. "We could be free." Participants join in mythic play in which they may be heroes, heroines, magicians, fairies, healers, sages, warriors and the like. No one has to worry about getting eliminated from the story. Even when a player is declared "dead," he or she dons a spirit costume, heads for a place called "re" to become reincarnated and either returns to character or takes on another role.

Along with creative play, problem-solving, conflict resolution and other goals, Moody said,

Adventure Game Theater is about team-building and awareness.

"THE MORE you start playing these roles, the greater awareness you gain about other people," Moody said. "Our number-one rule is respect for others and their feelings."

The story that campers were gearing up to continue at the camp at Wildacres involved two worlds, one populated by fairies and the other by dark elves. These worlds, whose inhabitants worship dragons, were heading for a collision during a dimensional shift. By the end of the game, however, Moody said the rift would heal.

The entire adventure comes to light at the end of camp through a bardic circle in which participants enjoy poetry-reading, singing, and telling stories of their quests and exploits.

Victoria Howland, a 20-year-old staff member whose first experience with Adventure Game Theater was as a healer five years ago at the Center for Symbolic Studies in New Paltz, remembers the bardic circle there.

"I just looked around at all these people so happy. I started to cry," Howland, a New Jersey resident, said. "I know it sounds cheesy."

Moody says the circle in which campers share their adventures is extremely popular, often lasting up to five hours. Compared to television, which Moody calls the campfire of today, the bardic circle, he said, is far superior. Unlike TV, he said, live sharing builds and strengthens community.

"It's how we used to function as a culture, truly telling stories," Moody said. "There's something very nurturing and very ancient about that."

For information about Adventure Game Theater call 1-888-792-PLAY or visit the website at www.agt.org. The organization's e-mail address is info@agt.org.