

# Kids say plenty in play

They can't vote, but 6 young cast members make their political views clear on a Near West Side stage

By Jon Anderson  
Tribune staff reporter

Unlike other nominees she could name—but doesn't—this candidate for president of the United States is running on a straightforward platform:

Lower the price of gasoline to 50 cents a gallon. Pay teachers as much as movie stars. Build houses for the poor. Put a playground in every neighborhood. Obey each and every one of the 10 Commandments. And, "until they change their behavior, make bullies wear a detector on their wrist."

So says America Harrison. But don't look for her on any major-party ticket soon.

For one thing, she's 11.

For another, America Harrison isn't even her real name.

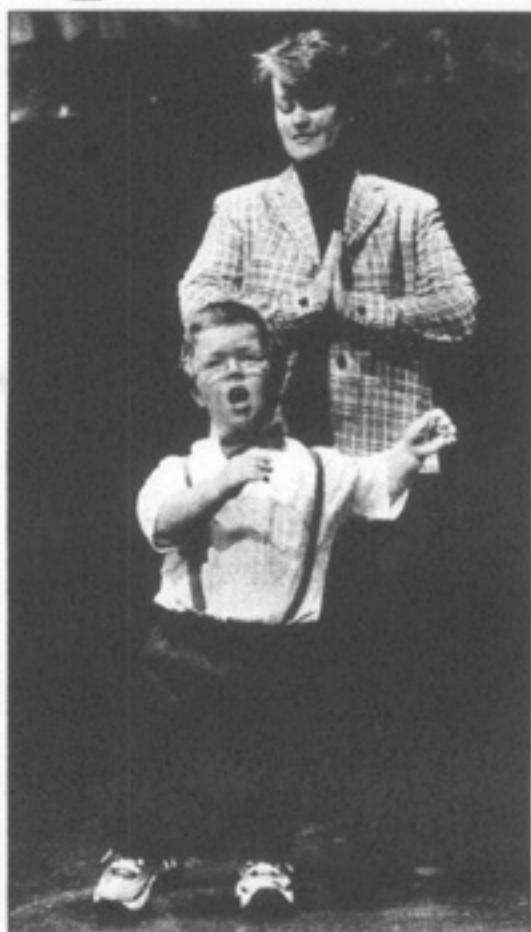
It is the stage persona of Te'Arle Williams, a 6th-grader from the Austin neighborhood, the star of a 75-minute show opening a two-weekend run Friday night at the Duncan YMCA Chernin Center for the Arts, 1001 W. Roosevelt Rd.

Titled "Six Stories Up on Capitol Hill," the musical play, with a cast of six adults and six kids, has much to say about politics, personal differences, overcoming disabilities and an ongoing struggle for equality in a country where the realities of life don't always match up with its ideals.

It also features lifelong lessons of the kind not always taught in school.

"I used to work on 'Sesame Street,' so I know the field. But this is the most meaningful children's theater I've ever seen," said Judith Harding during a rehearsal break Tuesday.

Harding plays Sen. Margaret Chase Smith in a show that also has Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Susan B. Anthony, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Stephen A. Douglas and Dr. Martin Luther



Ben Saylor portrays Mr. Jumpshot as he tries to convince President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's secretary, played by Beth Ann Bryant-Richards, that he is qualified to be the president's mobility consultant. They are among a cast of six adults and six children in the musical play at the Duncan YMCA Chernin Center for the Arts.

King Jr.—plus advice on how to make dreams come true.

"Each year, we pair six Chicago storytellers with six middle-school children. Each pair writes a 10-minute theater piece, then we weave them together," explained director Tekki Lomnicki, the major force behind Tellin' Tales Theatre, the show's production company.

Some of the actors have physical disabilities.

But the idea, said Lomnicki, who describes herself as "a little person," is that "adults and children with and without disabilities, of all races, all income levels, work together on equal terms. The mix is important. Community is built where none existed before."

The productions, described on the troupe's Web site—[www.tellintales.org](http://www.tellintales.org)—are a learning experience all around, Lomnicki said.

For Ben Saylor, 11, of Naperville, for example, it is a chance to work with a successful director built along his dimensions.

"I wanted Ben to see that here is an adult little person

who is working, following her passion. Her size isn't an issue," said his mother, Heather Saylor.

Sarah Schechtman-Thale, 14, of Evanston, created a song-and-dance number, defying her cerebral palsy.

"She's always loved theater. Here, she says, 'They're all so fun, Mom,'" reported her mother, Barbara Schechtman.

Not everything went smoothly during this week's rehearsals.

Yes, most of the props, puppets and costumes showed up, including face masks resembling Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush. (John Kerry masks, the prop manager explained, are not on the market yet.) But one accouterment was missing.

"Your suspenders? Oh, no, they didn't come?" moaned Lomnicki as Matthew Kopp, a veteran of Blue Rider Theater, paraded by for inspection in his tall-tails formal outfit. Kopp plays Abraham Lincoln, a man with many problems and—until his suspenders arrive—saggy pants.