

IN THE CLASSROOM

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June Lew, first-grade teacher at Marquez Elementary School in Pacific Palisades

This Educator Makes a Production of Teaching

Roving drama teacher Jonas Basom gets pupils in character to improve reading comprehension.

By JIA-RUI CHONG
Times Staff Writer

Jonas Basom wasn't satisfied with the Marquez Elementary School second-graders' begrudging, listless "Good afternoon."

"How boring," said Basom, a rotating drama teacher for the Los Angeles Unified School District. "I'm going to fall asleep."

Squinting one eye and crooking his arm, Basom showed why the county's Music Center in downtown Los Angeles recently honored him with a \$2,000 Bravo Award for innovative arts education.

"Now say good afternoon like a pirate," the 32-year-old said, leaning toward the youngsters.

Giggling and exaggerating Basom's body language, all 16 children perked up. "Argggghhh," they growled out of the right sides of their mouths. "Good afternoon. Grrrrrrrr."

Now that he had their attention, Basom pointed to the chalkboard where he had written "beginning/characters," "middle/conflict" and "end/conclusion." He began his real lesson: teaching them about plot and training their teacher, Susan Schwartz, to use the drama games to improve reading comprehension.

For Basom and the two other Bravo winners this year, the arts are both an end and a means to help children understand traditional subjects such as literature and math better.

In the face of cutbacks in education funding, Music Center officials said it was more important than ever to reward high-caliber arts teaching: \$2,000 apiece for Basom and Dana Howard, a fifth- and sixth-grade

teacher at Lehigh Elementary School in Montclair, and \$5,000 to the South Shores/Cal State Dominguez Hills Magnet School for the Visual and Performing Arts in San Pedro.

Established in 1983 during the lean years of arts funding after Proposition 13 capped property taxes, the Bravo Awards seek to raise the profile of arts education, said Lynda Jenner, the center's director of community partnerships. Competition has grown fiercer, she added, with 51 candidates this year.

The judges said the integration of dance, music, drama and visual arts into the regular classroom at South Shores earned the L.A. Unified arts magnet school its Bravo Award. The school's third-graders, for instance, familiarize themselves with fractions by singing about pizza slices.

Judges said Dana Howard impressed them by instilling an appreciation for arts and encouraging independent thinking. Judge Althea Woods, who saw Howard teach a lesson on ancient Egypt with about 50 ceremonial masks, said she admired the way Howard's fifth- and sixth-graders respectfully handled them and painted their own without copying each other.

"People need to realize that teachers can make an indelible impression through the arts — whether it's math, history or Matisse," Jenner said. "It's the way lessons are absorbed."

Basom landed his first professional stage role in the fifth grade as a lunch-stealing bully in a Christmas play at the Seattle Children's Theatre. As a teenager, he talked up beach shorts in radio ads and belted out songs in high school musicals. While earning a bachelor's degree in English and French at Amherst College, he performed in a musical revue. He also studied at Rainbow's Clown College in 1995 and ran his own party entertainment company.

In 1999, Basom began developing drama lesson plans as he worked toward his master's degree in education at Pepperdine University. He refined the games — which now total 101 — while teaching at the private Buckley School in Sherman Oaks.

With the Los Angeles district since 2000, Basom usually divides his week among three schools, visiting about four classrooms a day in addition to holding a resource session with teachers. The wandering minstrel wheels his supplies — which include lesson plans, "character cards," masking tape, a tambourine and a black magic hat — from room to room on a small luggage cart.

Basom believes drama can help explain even the most abstract of concepts. For example, he said, "Science and theater work together brilliantly well because both are energy-oriented."

Basom illustrated by explaining how he adapted "The Mingle Game" to re-create the water cycle for third-graders: Students move around the classroom mimicking ocean waves, jump up to the ceiling to enact evaporation, grumble loudly and gather together to form a rain cloud, make a bursting sound as they fall to the ground like droplets, and mingle like waves again.

The exercise shows how drama can engage "kinesthetic learners" — children who learn best by doing — Basom said. It also shows how such drama games can reinforce social skills for learning, such as cooperation, listening, clear speaking and self-confidence.

"Drama is tremendously successful for special-education students and English learners because it is universal in the ways people express themselves: through emotion, actions and gestures," Basom added.

The quieter children seemed to light up one recent afternoon when Basom had them reenact "The Little Red Hen" in June



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DRAMATIC! Teacher Jonas Basom makes a point with second-graders Shannon Dunn, left, and Mallory Culbertson in Julie Yoshida's class at Marquez Elementary School in Pacific Palisades.

Lew's first-grade class at the Marquez campus in Pacific Palisades.

After adding adjectives to describe the characters of the duck, pig and mouse in the story, Basom asked the children to do their own character impressions.

Though Kristopher Davis said little, nodding to show he enjoyed Basom's class and naming "The Freeze Dance" as his favorite activity, Davis quacked, wiggled his limbs and scurried with the other 19 children during

Basom's exercise.

"Some of the kids have blossomed in drama," Lew said after Basom's class. "They talk more. They're more expressive. They feel free to be wild and silly because he is so silly."

The 15-year teaching veteran said Basom's connection with the children also helps.

"What's so impressive about him is that he introduces pantomime or some concept like plot or setting and in 10 to 15 minutes the kids get it," she said. "They

go around reminding each other to 'articulate' and go around saying, 'Projection: to speak loudly on stage!'"

Second-graders at Marquez insisted that they learned a lot from Basom. Though Hailey Biscow couldn't find the words to define "plot" after class, she did remember another word not often heard in second-graders' vocabulary.

"Tableau?" she said triumphantly. "It's a frozen picture. It's a French word."