



ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

# Their homes and school burned in the Eaton fire. But these theater kids rise from the ashes



Jolie Simmons as Princess Fiona, left, Dylan Hunt as Shrek and Journee Everly as Donkey in "Shrek the Musical Jr." at the Ahmanson Theatre in L.A. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)



**By Jessica Gelt**  
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About 60 theater students from Altadena and Eliot Arts magnet schools lost their homes, their stage and their neighborhoods in the Eaton fire.

In a story of how deep trauma can be tempered by kindness and resilience, these children carried on.

Here is what happened next, when the curtain rose on “Shrek the Musical Jr.” in front of a capacity crowd at a substitute stage: the grand Ahmanson Theatre in L.A.

This is a story about 60 kids who lost their homes, their theater, their whole neighborhoods to the Eaton fire as it raged through Altadena on a ferociously windy night one week into the new year.

For the students of Altadena Arts Magnet and Eliot Arts Magnet schools, however, the story does not end there. Because in a remarkable display of community spirit, these kids became the characters of a different drama — this one about young survivors who, determined to carry on their spring musical, channel their loss into a one-night-only, sold-out performance of “Shrek the Musical Jr.” on one of L.A.’s most prestigious stages, the 2,100-seat Ahmanson Theatre.

At 7:01 p.m., a minute after the show is set to begin, the cast huddles backstage around their director, Mollie Lief, and their choreographer, Billy Rugh. The mood is quiet, anticipatory — reverential.

“Whatever happens on that stage, it will be brilliant,” Lief tells her students, before holding up a small charm. “In my hand is a phoenix rising from the ashes, with a green ‘Shrek’ background. All of you are truly phoenixes rising from the ashes, making something beautiful that will last forever.”

*All of you are truly phoenixes rising from the ashes, making something beautiful that will last forever.*

— Eliot Arts drama teacher Mollie Lief

Rugh then rallies the kids, telling them, “Reach for the entire audience and be super, super freaks,” a reference to one of the musical’s biggest numbers.

“Energy, energy, energy, energy,” the group chants together, breathing as one, readying to storm the stage and wow the excited guests, many of whom are from burn-scarred Altadena and Pasadena. With that, the kids scatter to their places, the house lights go down, the stage lights come up and the show begins.

“Once upon a time, there was a little Ogre named Shrek, who lived with his parents in a bog by a tree,” reads 13-year-old Dakota Bradley, from an oversize storybook, beginning “Shrek the Musical Jr.,” about displaced fairy-tale characters who are saved from the evil machinations of a callous overlord by an improbable hero who finds true love in a totally unexpected way. There are farts and burps for laughs, but mostly the show is about self-love and acceptance — about how goodness can and will prevail, even in the darkest of circumstances.

Altadena Arts Magnet and Eliot Arts Magnet students in “Shrek the Musical Jr.” at the Ahmanson. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Ninety minutes later the theater erupts in cheers and an effusive standing ovation for the ecstatic young thespians.

“I’m sooooo happy,” says a breathless 11-year old named Journee Everly, who played Donkey, as she rushes offstage after an encore bow.

“I’m sooooo sad,” says 12-year-old Monahmi Ruiz, who played Dragon.

The girls look at each other and laugh giddily, an unspoken acknowledgment that they meant the same thing. Joy and sorrow are intermingled because this grand experience — involving professional sets, costumes, lighting and sound, as well as videos of personal encouragement made for the kids by Broadway superstars Lin-

Manuel Miranda, Daveed Diggs and the casts of “The Lion King” and “Aladdin” — is over.



Jolie Simmons, left, Journee Everly and Dylan Hunt in “Shrek the Musical Jr.” (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

## The show must go on

Tuesday, Jan. 7, was a good day for the newly minted cast of “Shrek the Musical Jr.” They gathered after school for their first table read and headed home with their scripts, brimming with excitement about the musical. Lief remembers that when someone opened a door to the outside, it looked a bit like the tornado scene from “The Wizard of Oz.” It was scary but also dramatic and entertaining for the kids who had no way of knowing what the intense Santa Ana winds were capable of.

Less than two hours later, Altadena erupted in flames.

Rugh, an accomplished choreographer with film and TV credits — observed what he believes may have been the beginning of the fire from his home near the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. He was sitting in his living room watching the wind make a tangle of his backyard when he saw “a little fire start” in the distance.



Choreographer Billy Rugh and drama teacher Mollie Lief oversee the production being rehearsed at McKinley middle school in Pasadena in early April. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

The kids he taught would spend that night and the following day fleeing. Almost half of the school's population lost homes, and many more would be displaced, including more than three-quarters of the cast of "Shrek the Musical Jr."

Lief woke at 6 a.m. that Wednesday to a house filled with smoke. She lived near Altadena, and like many in that position, including Rugh, was forced to leave not because of a mandatory evacuation order but because of the overwhelming smoke that smothered the area like a toxic blanket.

*They had already lost so much ... this could be one thing that we control them not losing.*

— Eliot Arts choreographer Billy Rugh

As she was driving to San Diego with her family, Lief saw her faculty group chat light up with the unfolding terror: colleagues who lost homes, whole families displaced, parents in need of a place to go — and then a video of Eliot Arts burning, followed by photos of the destroyed theater.

"I was in the car with two little kids, and I didn't want to scare them, but I was just stifling sobs," Lief says.

Thirteen-year-old Jolie Simmons, who played Princess Fiona, also saw the video of her burning school. That was after her house burned down. She was staying with her mother, father, four siblings and grandmother — affectionately known as Nema — at

the Pasadena Convention Center, which had been transformed into an emergency relief facility.

Eliot Arts student Jolie Simmons, who plays Princess Fiona, practices one of her songs earlier this month at McKinley middle school in Pasadena. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Jolie's Nema had lived in their family's home since 1977 and didn't want to leave. Jolie's father and Nema spent the night of the fire hosing down the house in an attempt to ward off the flames. When the mulch in the backyard caught fire, they finally left.

Tears spring to the girl's eyes as she recalls how much she loved her neighborhood, the many hours she spent in her friends' houses — and how the community felt like a big family.

“Eliot really was my second home, because I’ve played so many different roles there,” says Jolie, whose family has yet to find permanent housing.

Lief recalls an email Jolie sent about four days after the fire. It read something to the effect of, “Hey Ms. Lief, my house burned down, but should I be getting off book?”

It was this email, along with another from young Journee that drove home what Lief and Rugh already felt in their bones: The show absolutely must go on.

“They had already lost so much and were disconnected so much, that this could be one thing that we control them not losing,” Rugh says.

Students from Altadena Arts Magnet and Eliot Arts Magnet rehearse their spring musical earlier this month in Pasadena.  
(Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

## 'Seeing your kid perform on this stage'

Center Theatre Group and Pasadena Playhouse, two institutions that had a long history of collaboration with students from Pasadena Unified School District, soon marshaled resources to help the kids stage their production.

The month before the fire, CTG brought district kids to the Ahmanson to see “Once Upon a Mattress” starring Sutton Foster. Dylan Hunt, 13, who played Shrek, remembers watching with his mother.

“My mom, she likes making these really annoying comments,” Dylan says, smiling, adding by way of explanation, “Because she’s a mom.”

The comments were about how nice the show was — how good the day was — and Dylan decided to add his own thoughts to the mix.

“I looked at her, and I said, ‘You know what else would be nice? Seeing your kid perform on this stage.’”

And then, “under the worst circumstances,” Dylan says, it happened.

Altadena Arts Magnet and Eliot Arts Magnet students attend the matinee for “Shrek the Musical Jr.” at the Ahmanson Theatre on Friday. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

“We are there for our community when our community has always been there for us,” says Pasadena Playhouse Artistic Director Danny Feldman. “It’s a very natural thing. It was about lifting everyone up — those kids and their families — in a moment they need it.”

The theater leaders brought professional vocal coaches onboard for rehearsals and welcomed the kids to the Ahmanson for a full day of talks and interactions with their professional staff, including CTG’s stage and production managers, technical and shop directors, carpenters, electricians, and hair and makeup supervisors.

*You know what else would be nice? Seeing your kid perform on this stage.*

**— Dylan Hunt, 13**

Those same staffers helped to stage the final shows — one matinee and the grand evening performance, both on Friday. Scenery, props and half the costumes were donated by the Anaheim-based, family-run stage company 3D Theatricals, and the designers waived their fees. Rugh provided the other half of the costumes from his professional collection. The lighting package was donated by Volt Lites. A giant QR code on the back of the glossy program featuring headshots of the young actors invited audience members to donate toward rebuilding the arts programs at the two schools.



Drama teacher Mollie Lief gives direction to students prepping for “Shrek the Musical Jr.” earlier this month. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Unfortunately, that money might not be enough. In February, Lief learned that she was one of nearly 150 Pasadena teachers being laid off as the district deals with [a](#)

[reported \\$37-million budget deficit.](#)

She kept that difficult information to herself during rehearsals, not wanting to add tumult or disruption to her students' lives. Then, on Monday, she finally told them.

The kids, Lief says, are talking about making a May school board meeting their next stage, so they can tell district leaders just how much their theater teacher means to them.

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