

August 1, 2007



SteveSongs performs for Wolf Trap's Theater in the Woods series.

Culturing Under Canopies

Theater in the Woods introduces children to performing arts – and parents have fun too.

BY CHRISTOPHER STATEN
 THE CONNECTION

Set deep in the woods of Wolf Trap's 117-acre plot of land, scores of parents strolled down a shaded path, some swinging their children by the arms, others chatting with other parents as they pushed strollers under the canopy of trees. It's Saturday morning at Wolf Trap and the final performance of SteveSongs' week-long run is about to begin. Lined against the path's wooden fence, baby strollers are parked neatly side-by-side: One might imagine this is how the outside of a biker-bar for toddlers would look. The attraction, Theatre in the Woods,

is one of Wolf Trap's many programs sponsored by its Education Outreach office. Geared towards a younger audience base, it's not only a source of entertainment for children in the waning days of summer, but a tradition many families have enjoyed throughout the program's existence.

SITTING IN THE MUGGY, early-morning air before the show, Shane Kerr came to Saturday's performance with his mother Debbie Sansone and his son Mason. Veterans of the venue, Mason sat quietly between father and grandmother as the outdoor seating filled up around them.

"I've been bringing the kids here for 35 years," said Sansone, a resident of South Riding. "Mason, my grandson, he loves music. I think this is a fantastic place. I used

to bring my kids to musicals – anything they had."

Kerr, who drove with his son from Gainesville for the show, remembers attending the venue as a child and hopes his son will also appreciate the exposure to the arts.

"It's full circle," he said. "[Mason] enjoys music and music has always been part of our lives."

The program, which began in the early 1970's has a simple mission statement:

To expose young children to the performing arts in an effort to foster a life-long appreciation. Running every summer from June through August, Theater in the Woods has a history of presenting an eclectic selection of artists, from local regional puppet groups to nationally

What to See

Don't miss out on the last few weeks of performances at Wolf Trap's Theater in the Woods. Groups still left on the schedule include the Maryland Youth Ballet, Baltimore Opera Company, Rocknocoeros and the Dance Institute of Washington. For times and prices, visit www.wolftrap.org or look through our Calendar listings.

Into the Woods

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touring artists, such as Steve Roslonek's band SteveSongs – which not only drew a sold-out crowd on its final performance, but incited a mob at the merchandise table at the end of the performance.

"It's become a real tradition in Northern Virginia," said Sarah Andrew Wilson, assistant director of Education Outreach, part of the [Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts](#). "I talk to a lot of parents and they say they came here as a child."

Wilson believes this is largely due to the quality of performers Theater in the Woods has continued to secure each season.

"It's a big mix of high quality artists that cover puppets, dance, studio and music," she said.

But not all concert-goers are life-long audience members. The Paul family, of Arlington, were one of many families experiencing the outdoor theater for the first time this past Saturday.

"This is our first time and our child brought us out here," said Sandy Paul. "We heard the ads for years and decided to come out here."

For other parents, such as Jean Chang of Fairfax, they've been enjoying the variety of performers for some time. Walking with her daughter, Chang says she "found this on the Wolf Trap website," and picks a range of shows for her daughter to attend "because she has different musical tastes."

AS FOR STEVESONGS, Roslonek apparently has enough pull in the toddler demographic to warrant sell-out crowds – and popular enough in the mini-

van album rotation to prompt many of the parents in the audience to reveal how familiar they were with the lyrics. Relying on audience participation, it wasn't uncommon for parents to be as animated as their children, singing along or helping out with the call-and-response portion of Roslonek's set.

"This next song, a few people asked if we could sing about elephants – it's kind of a silly song," deadpanned Roslonek, which was met by cheers from both the children and adults who knew just exactly what song he was hinting at.

"This guy Steve is really cool," said Jill Headley, of Bethesda. "He's really good for the kids. There are a variety of shows here and they're good family shows."

But to say that Theater in the Woods is just a quick show – or two, one beginning at 10 a.m. and a different act at 11:15 a.m. – would be simplifying something larger. After the first performance, a number of families opened picnic blankets on the grassy hill of the Wolf Trap grounds amidst the growing heat of a soon-to-be very muggy late-summer day. Two birthday parties capitalized on the sliver of shade that followed the bank of the creek on the property. Other parents mingled while their children ran around together in the grass.

"A lot of people get day passes and make a whole day out of it," said Wilson.

And what if it rains? Wilson points out that, barring downpours, most shows continue as scheduled.

"Even if it sprinkles the show will still go on because the trees create a natural roof," she said.

Sansone sums it up, simply.

"I think this is a perfect setting," she said.