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*Our **Community Spotlight** is a monthly feature where we talk to a local mom who is making a difference in the community or otherwise deserves to be celebrated and supported. We also offer free Community Spotlight ads to small local mom-owned businesses. If you know of someone who should be profiled or would like to apply for a free ad, [drop us a line](#).*

At Mommy Poppins we think being a mother extends to all those actively reaching out to the hearts and minds of children, including Daddies, and the two bold women we are featuring in our second community spotlight. Liza Lentini (Creative Director) and Christine Seisler (Managing Director) run a non-profit theater company, called [Elephant Ensemble Theater](#), that goes into children's hospitals to bring the delight of fantasy and freedom through original live theater to sick kids. Read on, because besides being inspired to do service, Liza gives us tips on how to bring more theatricality into our own homes (as if tantrums weren't enough).

### **How and Why did you form your organization?**

I came to New York to "make my mark" on the theater world after getting my MFA and being involved in the theater since childhood. After some modest successes I realized that making your mark is more than what you do for yourself. Since I always knew I would work with children, it followed that I would form a company that would provide a positive experience for kids. They say that when you're on the right path, everything will fall into place, and that's what seemed to happen as I formed [Elephant Ensemble Theater](#). It took a full year to build the foundation for the company—the brand, the website, the actual play itself!—but once our actors were in place we just took off. We didn't have a single penny, and had no idea how we'd buy costumes, but we didn't care. We couldn't wait to get started and perform for these kids.

### **What kinds of obstacles did you face?**

People make a lot of excuses as to why they DON'T do things, and often the reason is money. We started Elephant with nothing but our day jobs (I actually cashed in my pension to have money for the website!). That said, it really was just Christine and myself doing everything in our spare time, on our spare dollar. It took longer than it would have if we had funding, but what we didn't have in dollars we made up for with heart — that I can assure you!

Just like any business, we had to build a reputation, and that took time, energy, and persistence.

### **What has been a powerful experience that has highlighted for you why you started Elephant**

### **Theater in other words what positive effect has it had on the sick children?**

Before the show starts we have some time with the kids. They are all such brave little souls. It's understandable that some are, typically, in a very unhappy state when we first meet them. But once the show starts, we get to see them utterly transform. They laugh, they cheer. If we can help them to feel good then we've done our job. There's truly nothing more gratifying, and nothing more important.

At the end of our show at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore, one of the little girls rushed up at the end to hug the actress playing Thumbelina. It was one of the most beautiful experiences I've ever had in my 30-odd years in the theater. The child and the actor were connected.

These hospitals are devoted to healing these children's bodies, and even have programs in place to care for their emotions, but what we do heals their spirit. It gives them a sense of joy and optimism, gives dimension to their day-to-day lives of treatment and combating their illness. Everything in their world is affected when they become sick, including their self-image, and all of the emotions they must feel as a natural part of the process...I'm sure is overwhelming. We like to believe we encourage their healing. Not in a medical sense, but by reminding them what it means to be a child, through joy and laughter. We believe that play gives them emotional strength and releases tension. It reminds them of the joy in living. It also breaks the silence. In the case of Thumbelina, they're able to be in a group, and participate in Thumbelina's safe return home, via their audience participation. It gives them value, and a sense of belonging. Play keeps their innocence alive.

### **In your opinion what do chronically ill children need in terms of imagination, creative outlets and expression?**

Kids need the opportunity to just be kids, regardless of their circumstances. The theater is magical, and unlike any other medium, because it is a live experience. There is a connection between the actors and the audience that can't be achieved through film and television. Theater has the ability to transport those who can suspend disbelief. It's an honor to perform for these remarkable children. I know we feel amazing being a part of their world, and I can only hope they get as much out of us as we do them. They're the most incredible people I've ever met.

### **How can we bring more theater into our homes?**

Theater is already in your home! Theater is about two main, basic principles, story and role playing. Kids start very early with role playing, just watch a child give dialogue to a puppet or their favorite doll, and children are read stories when they're still in the womb. You're never too old for a good story, and you're never too old to play.

But for a more structured approach, there are so many great children's plays out there, and it's a fantastic experience for a family to sit down and read one. Theater teaches kids how to collaborate; there must be a give and take in collaboration, and it's never too early for kids to learn this invaluable life lesson.

For those more ambitious, it's not as hard as you might think to write a play! All great stories are based on great characters, and great characters have to have one thing: A purpose. It's easier sometimes to think of it as a "goal". What does this character want overall? (They could want to be a better person, they could want to save the world, or they could simply want to find a friend.) And what will they do, scene-by-scene, in order to achieve this? What are the repercussions of these goals? They shouldn't achieve their goal until the very end. That's what a story is all about.

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