



Imaginators Jerry G. White (left) and Eric Little perform "Tulle's Roots," a musical about a tulip poplar that talks to a boy, at Imagine It. The troupe of professional actors performs about five times a day at the children's museum. Photos by **Jamie Gumbrecht** [jgumbrecht@ajc.com](mailto:jgumbrecht@ajc.com)

# Troupe hones its child's play

## The Imaginators perform at museum.

Words, music keep kids enthralled and teach at the same time.

By **Jamie Gumbrecht**  
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From opening to closing, Imagine It pulses with the force of the sippy-cup set. But for 20 minutes about five times a day, everybody slows down,

finds a comfy spot on the carpet and catches a show.

It's the first experience with live theater for many, but from the moment the Imaginators open their mouths, kids are mesmerized. Children's museums often partner with youth theaters, but few have a steady group of professional actors who are their own exhibition — writing musicals, choreographing dances and performing them on the museum floor with the exhibitions as their backdrops.

**Museum** continued on D2

## Imagine It

10 a.m.-4 p.m. Mondays-Fridays;  
10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays-Sundays. \$12.50, age 2 and older; free, age 2 and younger. 275 Centennial Olympic Park Drive N.W., Atlanta. 404-659-5437, [www.childrensmuseumatlanta.org](http://www.childrensmuseumatlanta.org).

## In brief

### THEATER

#### Morgan joins 'Country'

Country music star Lorrie Morgan has been added to the cast of "Pure Country," which is expected to open on Broadway next year. Morgan will join Joe Nichols, another well-known country singer, in the musical based on the hit 1992 movie starring George Strait and Lesley Ann Warren.

### KIDS

#### New Web show on PBS

PBS is launching an online cross-country adventure for children starring two brothers — who happen to be gophers. The Web-only "Wilson & Ditch: Digging America," produced by the Jim Henson Co., follows the furry siblings as they explore America and learn about its culture, history and geography. The site, aimed at children ages 6 to 10, will debut on [pbskidsgo.org](http://pbskidsgo.org) this fall.

### BOOKS

#### On shelves this week

"Bad Moon Rising" by Sherrilyn Kenyon (St. Martin's Press, \$24.99). In the latest volume of the Dark-Hunter series, a forbidden love develops as war breaks out.

"Inherent Vice" by Thomas Pynchon (Penguin Group, \$27.95). In this psychedelic novel that takes place in the '60s, a pot-smoking private eye investigates a plot to kidnap his ex-girlfriend's love interest.

#### Today's number

**\$100,000**

Cash prize that accompanies Philadelphia's 2009 Liberty Medal. This year's recipient is filmmaker Steven Spielberg.

#### They said it

"We're just trying to edit down the standing and the hugging ... and the walking down the aisle." — Emmy host **Neil Patrick Harris** on the decision to pre-tape some of the awards. More than 150 members of the Writers Guild of America object to it.

From staff and news services



Jerry G. White (standing) and Eric Little perform "Tulie's Roots." The theater troupe, which uses the exhibition space as its stage, writes its own material. Photos by Jamie Gumbrecht jgumbrecht@ajc.com

## Troupe educates, entertains

### Museum

continued from D1

"It's guerrilla theater; it's street theater," said Pamela Duncan, the museum's program manager. Actors are the bridge between objects on display and how children learn, she says. They also do outreach programs outside the museum that go where exhibits can't.

When Duncan was hired shortly after the museum opened six years ago, she had a long stage background, no museum experience and an order to build a theater troupe. The Imaginators are a 12-person force that writes a new show for each traveling exhibition and leads an activity several times a day. After the museum closes, they go to Atlanta's more grown-up stages and film studios.

But the actors have become experts on entertaining children. Since their first show — a script that came with the "Arthur's World" exhibition in 2005 — they've written their own material, growing as they understood what works for the waist-high crowd. A basic guide: Giggles are good; pint-size mutiny is bad.

"Parents say, 'I can't believe my child sat that long,'" said full-time Imaginator Jerry G. White, 52, who worked with the museum even before it had opened.

Here's what the Imagi-



White poses with a group of Girl Scouts from Gwinnett County after a performance. The Imaginators also do programs outside the museum.

**"Parents say, 'I can't believe my child sat that long.'"**

**Jerry G. White**  
Imaginator

nators have learned about capturing kids' imaginations.

**Kids like to hear from their own.**

To match the "Exploring Trees Inside and Out" exhibition that continues through Sept. 13, Imaginators created a musical about Tulie, a tulip popular that talks to a little boy. Pat Hall is played by 30-year-old actor Eric Little, in cuffed jeans and high tops. When Pat's dad shoos him away from video games, the 8-year-old whines, ar-

gues, delays — then obeys his dad and heads outdoors.

**Kids are smarter than you think.**

Words will go over kids' heads, but Imaginators don't like to use silly voices, sound effects and made-up blabbering. "You take them to this fantasy truthfully," Little said.

**Always, always use music.**

The Imaginators write not just a play, but a musical. (White's father, a jazz musician, usually writes and records the music for them.) Two upbeat songs per show will hypnotize an antsy audience of tots. Repeat the lyrics a few times and they'll sing along. "He kept saying 'Music, mommy, music!'" Lauren Howell of Braselton said of her 2-year-old son, Liam. "He could barely contain his excitement."

**Be in there with them.**

Imaginators often sit in the audience and pull it in-

to the show. If a rogue child toddles up on "stage," he'll be incorporated into the play until a parent fetches him. It might be the biggest difference between theater for adults and theater for kids. Little said: "With the kids, we break the fourth wall every day. The show is always in the present."

**Kids love to be scared.**

Easiest laugh in the show: When one character sneaks up on another. The louder the yelp, the better. "They like the sound, the movement, the reaction," White said.

**Keep parents happy.**

There's no adult humor, but some jokes are more for parents than kids. During a baseball scene in "Tulie's Roots," the actors repeat an old Skip Caray call, something most kindergartners won't catch. And at the end of the show, young Pat admits, however reluctantly, that sometimes parents are right to send their kids outside.

**Q: Tell me about "How'd You Get So Rich?"**

**A: It's about how people in this day and age with a good idea and a lot of vision can still have the American dream. We show how they spend their money and some crazy ways they've made it. It's a lot of fun.**

**Q: Is there a secret to success?**

**A: It's having an idea that you totally believe in and then working at it. Not a person that we interviewed did not have a great work ethic.**

**Q: You're also about to be roasted on Comedy Central.**

**A: Kathy Griffin is the mistress, and we're very good friends. Some of the roasters will be Robin Carver from "Howard Stern," Lily Tomlin, Carl Reiner and Brad Garrett.**

**Q: Ed McMahon recently passed away. You know him from your days filling in as host of "The Tonight Show." What was he like?**

**A: Ed McMahon was the sweetest, nicest guy. What you saw is what you got. He was very kind to me. When I left "The Tonight Show" to go over to Fox, Johnny Carson put out a mandate that nobody was allowed to talk to me. Ed McMahon, whenever he saw me, would come over and make it his business to say hello. That was very sweet.**

**TV previews**  
"How'd You Get So Rich?"  
10 tonight on TV Land.

"The Comedy Central Roast of Joan Rivers"  
10 p.m. Sunday on Comedy Central.