



Photo: Kelli Ulcail

## New Artist-in-Residence Helps Children Blossom and Grow

BY LARRY HARLAND

**On the stage at ARIEL Theater, Artist-in-Residence Lauren Wilkins embraces her role, helping children to blossom and connect through the nonprofit's programs.**

**D**espite evidence that arts education bolsters the academic and social success of students, public schools continue to cut theater, dance and music programs.

Happily, places like ARIEL Theatrical help fill the void. Founded in 1989 by Gail Higginbotham, the Salinas nonprofit helps the children of Monterey County learn and grow within a collaborative, creative environment.

Following COVID sheltering, ARIEL has hired a new artist-in-residence, 29-year-old Lauren Wilkins, who as a shy young girl saw her confidence blossom through theater.

"It has a way of touching hearts and connecting people, especially children," Wilkins said.

Although the pandemic restricted rehearsals, Wilkins directed ARIEL's Virtual Playhouse

programs. She also joined the teaching team for The Play's the Thing, ARIEL's homeschool theater classes.

A graduate in theater arts at Brigham Young University, Wilkins began at the Walt Disney Co., first as an Attractions Cast Member before traveling to China to teach in the Disney youth programs.

"I really took to it," said Wilkins, who stayed three years. "It helped me better understand people and a different way of life."

Wilkins hopes to help inspire local children. "Kids reach out for a connection," Wilkins said. "What I love about ARIEL is helping kids strengthen themselves and become better people."

For more information please call 831/775-0976 or visit [arieltheatrical.org](http://arieltheatrical.org).