

Standing Up To Bullies: The Play



The cast of #JustBeYou (Irvington's Emma Silverman at far left)

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By Jeff Wilson—

Emma Silverman is fighting back against bullying – by playing a bully. The 13-year-old from Irvington stars in *#JustBeYou*, an anti-bullying musical produced by Random Farms Kids’ Theater, currently touring local schools, most recently Eastchester and Hastings-on-Hudson.

Silverman plays the villainess Amber, a popular yet egocentric manipulator, the “Little Miss Perfect” of Warren G. Harding Middle School. Silverman acknowledged in an interview that while Amber is a “fun role to play,” it simultaneously makes her realize that “[bullying] is not a lot of fun to do.”

“It’s just better to be nice and treat others with respect,” she has concluded, adding that most of her real-life friends at Irvington High School, where she’s a freshman, are very supportive.

Random Farms Kids’ Theater, based in Elmsford, is a nonprofit founded in 1995 by Anya Wallach and a handful of 8- to 12-year-old local children performing for their parents in a clubhouse in the Random Farms community of Chappaqua. The operation has since turned into a theater powerhouse, staging professional-caliber productions with hundreds of children throughout Westchester. In 2006, Random Farms became the resident children’s theater at The Tarrytown Music Hall. In 2009 the group provided actors to portray Munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz* for its national touring company’s performance at Madison Square Garden. A year later they collaborated on a project with Disney. With Wallach still at the helm as CEO, Random Farms is also a full-service theatrical academy, offering classes in singing, dancing and acting. Many members have been involved with the organization for years; Silverman has been studying there since first grade. “They made me love musical theater,” she said.

In 2008 Random Farms started an anti-bullying tour, presenting a musical called *The New Kid*. It ran about 150-200 performances over the next 12 years, reaching more than 30,000 children. COVID brought the tour to a halt in 2020, and during its hiatus the company commissioned playwrights Eric C. Webb and Stephanie Bianchi, who composed the music and lyrics, to produce a more relevant play incorporating the issue of cyber-bullying. The result was *#JustBeYou*, a 40-minute comedy-drama including eight songs with titles like “It’s Just the Same Old Same Old,” “I Pledge Allegiance to the Misfits” and “What Would Spidey Do?”

#JustBeYou plays on teens’ preoccupation with popularity, an obsession that operates on steroids in the age of social media. The action kicks off with the introduction of a new phone app called Instapop – an Aladdin’s Lamp of sorts – that offers users, especially the protagonist Jordan, an escape from the low social status he and the other members of his clique endure. With the help of Instapop, Jordan boosts his street cred but goes overboard, loading his profile with wild exaggeration. Soon, Jordan is confronted by the treacherous Amber, who sees through his embellishments and threatens to expose him unless he frames his brainy best friend Beth as a test cheat, leaving Amber as the undisputed head of the class, GPA-wise (though it’s actually Amber who’s been cheating all along). Jordan chooses loyalty to his bestie over the status he achieved by duplicity and turns the tables on Amber, dethroning the Queen Bee and forcing her to confess her academic fakery to the principal.

Silverman described the Q&A session that follows the show. “We (the cast) ask the students about what forms of bullying they saw,” she explained. “They have opportunities to ask us questions and share their experiences.” This activity “hopefully builds a more accepting community” that discourages bullying.

“The feedback has been fantastic,” gushed Webb (who is now Random Farms’ communications manager as well). He also discussed the study guide they created to complement the production. “It helps teachers engage students in conversations about the show, how we respond to different artistic forms as well as the play’s themes: bullying, self-esteem, social pressures.”

For more about Random Farms and *#JustBeYou*, visit the website www.randomfarmsny.org.