

Inside CHAPPAQUA

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Our Little Stars



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Is Musical Theater the New Soccer?

Local opportunities abound for young thespians

By JENNIFER LEVENTHAL

Sky Jarrett, a fifth grader in Chappaqua, has already appeared on Broadway and in a prestigious national tour. "Some people think it's really unusual," he said, "but to my real friends, I'm just doing a different activity, the way they might play a sport."

A decade ago, it was noteworthy to hear a child say, "Come see me in a show." Not anymore. It seems as though in every neighborhood of Northern Westchester, there are a handful of children who are passionate about acting, singing and dancing on stage.

Indeed, with after-school rehearsals and weekend workshops and performances, musical theater in our area has become a perfectly legitimate alternative to soccer. The reason is simple: Opportunity. Never before have there been so many wonderful programs for children to learn the art of theater.

Here's an introduction to some of the leading "players" who are teaching, coaching and directing the little stars of our community:



Anya Wallach directs Lilly Kolb (left) and Leslie Bernero (right) in a workshop performance of *A Little Princess*.

The Veteran:

Kevin Kearins, Artistic Director for KJK Productions

If you think the kids' musical theater craze is brand new, you obviously haven't met Kevin Kearins. For the past 22 years, Kearins has directed a Summer Theatre Camp for children, an outreach of KJK Productions, which serves as the major resident theater program at the Tarrytown Music Hall. Trained at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, Metropolitan Opera House and The Juilliard School, Kearins has directed over 40 classic Broadway musicals as well as more than 100 professional children's theater shows.

In addition to his many other roles, this year Kearins began teaching and directing an after-school theater program at Roaring Brook Elementary School in Chappaqua. "The most important part of theater training for kids is self-esteem," he said. "In our summer camp, we split the parts up; for example, we'll have 15 Annies, so that everyone gets a chance to work on the big roles."

Kearins finds that some of the children in his program come to get an introduction to theater, while others already boast resumés filled with professional credits, but want to keep their craft going. "For kids who just want to try acting as a fun activity for the summer, the child next to them who is pursuing a career is always a positive role model. We try to meet the needs of all kids," he said.

The Ingénue:

Anya Wallach, Producer/Director for Random Farms Kids Theater (RFKT)

Yes, she's young and pretty, but don't think she's naïve. When it comes to Anya Wallach, the 25-year-old producer/director for Random Farms Kids Theater, think Ingénue as in Ingenuity. As a child growing up in Chappaqua, she was very much into theater herself, but found that opportunities were limited. "Children's theater was not very accessible 10 or 15 years ago," Wallach said, "I was involved with school plays and some community theater, but the enriching experiences I craved were few and far between."

Instead of complaining about the lack of theater opportunities for kids, at 16 Wallach set out to change it. She started by putting flyers in mailboxes around the neighborhood (Random Farms), inviting kids to become part of a new theater group. "I wanted to create what I wished I had been part of," she remembered. Fast forward nine years, and today—a music education graduate of New York University—Anya Wallach is running a theater company whose main-stage productions play to packed houses all over Westchester and whose workshops have waiting lists within hours of their sign-up times.

"There are so many talented kids doing theater today," said Wallach, "I can't use every single kid in every main-stage production. That's why I created the workshops. Theater workshops make it possible for all kids to have this experience." John Mara, a 20-year-old actor and director from Harrison, NY, is one of the assistant directors for RFKT. "I love helping Anya work with the kids," he said. "She knows how to talk to them and they really relate to her." Julia Finkelstein, a fifth grader in Chappaqua, agrees. "My first theater experience was when I was five years old, with RFKT. It was a workshop called *Lights, Camera, Broadway!* I had never been on stage before, but the second Anya started teaching us, I knew I wanted to do it forever."

What makes RFKT's workshops so unusual is the combination of both professionalism and fun. Mara observes, "You'll see kids with

Broadway credits standing side-by-side with first time actors, and they'll all be learning something and growing with life-skills, not just on-stage skills." Wallach is not apologetic about the fact that she is encouraging to talented children who decide to pursue acting professionally. "I know some parents and teachers are against having kids working, and I admit that it is definitely not for everyone, but if the drive and passion is coming from the child and the whole family can keep the proper perspective, I think it can be a great experience. The key to balancing professional auditions with the rest of a kid's life is making certain that they're enjoying the whole process even if they never get cast."