

Westchester Teen Stricken by Post-Swine Flu Infection Performs at Tarrytown Musical Hall

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From Wheelchair To Waltz: A Westchester teenager, stricken by post-Swine flu infection, rises to the occasion as the 'Beast' in Random Farms Kids Theater's "Beauty and the Beast, Jr."



When 13-year-old Max Levy arrived for the first day of rehearsal on January 4, for his role as the Beast in The Random Farms Kids' Theater's production of Beauty and the Beast, Jr., he couldn't walk. The prospect of fulfilling the part that he was cast in last June seemed out of the question.

Confined to a wheelchair since mid-October, when a post-infection auto-immune disorder threw his central nervous system out of whack and caused him to lose feeling in his legs and feet, Max, of Pleasantville, NY, had barely been to school since September. He had missed out on everything from travel

baseball and tennis to bar and bat mitzvahs. But the eighth grader at HC Crittenden Middle School in Armonk had especially missed doing theater, one of his favorite activities.

Photo credit: Anya Wallach

Last June, just days after auditioning for Beauty and the Beast, Jr., Max boarded the bus for sleep away camp in Maine and, within days, was diagnosed with the H1N1 virus, more commonly known as the Swine flu. After spending a week in quarantine, Max was diagnosed with mycoplasma pneumonia. Soon after, he began to lose feeling in his toes. By early fall, he couldn't move or feel his knees and, soon afterwards, his thighs. He also suffered from exhaustion, malaise, and terrible headaches. Pain throughout his body made sleep difficult.

After myriad tests and misdiagnoses, the teenager was finally diagnosed with an auto-immune disorder and put on an intravenous gamma globulin regimen. But the recovery was slow and, when Max was finally able to return to play practice at Random Farms, he was told the show couldn't be re-staged in time to accommodate his wheelchair.

"We were heart-sick," says Random Farms Producer Anya Wallach. "While we didn't see anything wrong with having our leading man in a wheelchair, we knew we didn't have enough time to re-block the show so that Max could move around the stage safely. The set had already been built with all kinds of stairs and platforms."

Levy promised Wallach that he would walk within two weeks. Everyone was skeptical, as it had been months since Levy had been out of his wheelchair.

"I felt like everything in my life was taken away from me due to this illness," Levy said. "I couldn't stand losing one more thing, especially since I had been looking forward to playing the Beast since before the summer."

Levy forced himself to walk in the water and to swim at the JCC of Mid-Westchester in Scarsdale. With a new infusion of immuno-globulin, Levy graduated to a walker and then to crutches within the week.

"His recovery during rehearsals was remarkable," said Wallach. "None of us could believe how quickly he was making progress."

Max explained, "The entire cast and staff helped me come alive again. I'd hate to think where I'd be right now without this show."

After four months of home tutoring, Max went back to school. And by January 18, two weeks before the opening of the show at the Tarrytown Music Hall, Levy was waltzing with his Belle, Sarah Rossman of Harrison.

Levy will perform the role of the Beast January 30-31 at 1 pm at The Tarrytown Music Hall, 13 Main Street, Tarrytown. Performances continue the following weekend. For tickets, call Ticket Force at (877) 840-0457 or visit www.randomfarms.com.

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