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Theater group grows talent

Random Farm's child actors have risen to bigger roles

By Ellen Best
Special to The Journal News

CHAPPAQUA — When Anya Wallach was 16, a dozen neighborhood children auditioned for her first show in the basement of her home in the Random Farms section of Chappaqua. Six years later, her auditions attracted so many hopefuls that she had to rent space at the Westchester Conservatory of Music in White Plains.

So, on a recent Saturday, Wallach, founder and director of the Random Farms Kids Theater, saw 200 girls under 4-foot-10 sing, dance and read lines for an upcoming production of "Annie."

The reason so many child actors want to be part of a Random Farms play is that Wallach has sent an unusual number of young performers on to bigger stages — around the county and to television, film and Broadway. Some have started their own theater groups while still in grade school, with her blessings and advice. In Westchester, Random Farms stands alone as a professional yet child-friendly theater group that also uses adults.

Wallach, who now lives in Manhattan and has been acting since childhood, is very generous with her personal connections to people in "the business." Agents she invites often discover talent at auditions and performances. That gives Random Farms a unique rung on the ladder of children's theater in the New York City area.

Lisa Pitliuk of Echo Entertainment in New Jersey was on the casting panel at this month's auditions.

"In two days, I've seen terrific raw, unrepresented talent," she said. "The quality keeps improving at RFKT. It's a tribute to Anya."

Wallach, now 22 and recently graduated from New York University with a music education major, has been organizing these shows while attending college and pursuing her own acting career. The focus stays on



Photos by Matthew Brown/The Journal News

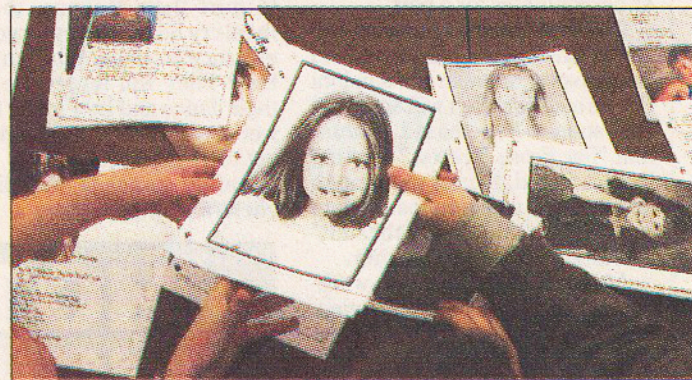
Director and producer Anya Wallach, far left, rehearses a dance with a group auditioning for a part in the Random Farms Theater production of "Annie." The Chappaqua-based theater group held auditions at the Westchester Music Conservatory in White Plains.



Sarah Fenno, 10, of Armonk sings a song during her audition.



Anya Wallach, right, talks with casting panelists Lisa Pitliuk, left, Erin Rakow, Bonnie Brooke and Billy Sarna, after they finished reviewing auditions for parts in "Annie."



Panelists look at theater bios of children at the audition.

children, she said, by doing children's plays.

For the "Annie" auditions, 30 children and a dozen teens and adults will be cast. Vying for those parts were people from as far away as Philadelphia and Delaware, as well as New York City, New Jersey and Westchester and Putnam counties.

It was a melting pot of Annie hopefuls — professional starlets, a local 5-year-old with no stage experience who clung to her mother's skirt, and others whose experience came from school plays, camp musicals or just practicing in front of their mirrors.

Wallach tries to make every-

one feel special. She told of a girl who had auditioned earlier in the day, unable to pick up simple dance steps. Wallach said, the girl kept trying and had unbelievable determination.

"I think she may have had some disabilities. We gave her a callback, and I offered to give her some extra coaching beforehand."

Although she is supportive of each individual, Wallach is quick to admit that, in the end, she picks the most talented children for the parts. But attitude — both in the children and their parents — is also a consideration.

"One girl at the audition was especially encouraging to the younger girls in her audition group. Besides having talent, we felt that she would be an asset to the cast," Wallach said. "One of the mothers was so pushy and

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Random Farms grows talent

TALENT, from 1B

abrasive that we could not consider her daughter for a part."

Last year, Pitliuk, the New Jersey agent, discovered 11-year-old Ben Moss of Katonah at a Random Farms audition. Ben will appear in the soon-to-be-released feature film "Far From Heaven," starring Dennis Quaid. "I can't say enough about Anya and how passionate she is about children's theater," said Brian Moss, Ben's father.

After participating in two workshops and one major production, Christian Valiando, 11, of Redding, Conn., met Wallach's agent. The agent has since booked Christian in two Broadway productions — "A Christmas Carol" and "Annie Get Your Gun" — and he also will be in Random Farms' "Annie."

Other professional child actors also want to stay connected to Wallach's group. Kristin Klabunde, 10, of New York City will soon play the part of Cosette in "Les Miserables" on Broadway. She was in the Broadway National Tour of "Annie" and has been on "Saturday Night Live," "Late Show with David Letterman," soap operas and numerous commercials. But still she wants to be in "Annie."

Rehearsals for "Annie" during the summer will be held at night, so children such as Kristin can still go to auditions and classes or fulfill other commitments during the day.

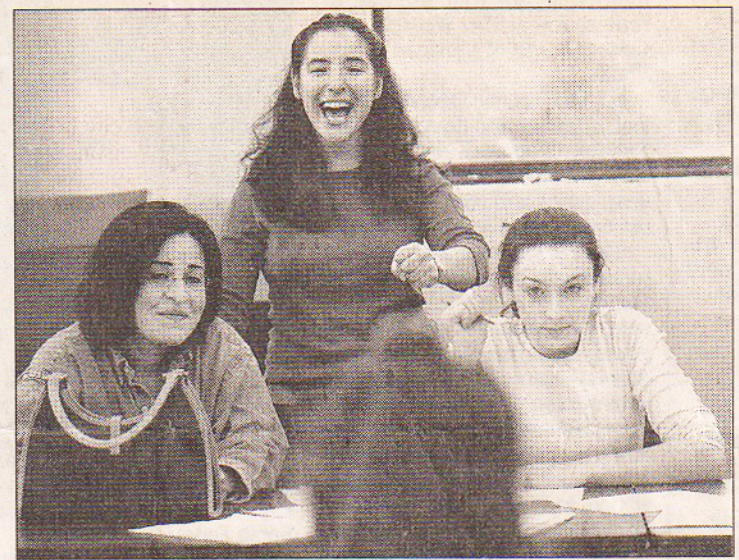
The auditions are by appointment in small groups, and callbacks are announced right afterward. Children are involved in almost every aspect of production alongside professional lighting technicians, set and costume designers, and hair and makeup artists. Last year, a 9-year-old worked the curtains.

Bonnie Brook, a 14-year-old assistant director, was one of the original neighborhood children who showed up in Wallach's basement for the first Random Farms production. She feels that the difference between Random Farms and other theater groups is "the way kids smile and the way the group comes together."

"It's a perfect balance between kids and adults," Bonnie said. "Anya treats kids like kids, not expecting them to go to bed at 1 in the morning. Sometimes, as assistant director, I end up screaming. Anya never loses it, never shows her frustration, is always patient."

Wallach said, "What I learned in college changed my perspective completely — that there are so many ways to make kids feel good about themselves. It's not worth it to hurt their feelings, to make them cry because they forgot their entrance on stage. Who am I to do that? They will forget the show, their dance and how many tickets were sold. But they will never forget their experience."

Annie, complete with live orchestra, will take place at Tarrytown



Matthew Brown/The Journal News

Director and producer Anya Wallach, center, asks a child auditioning for a part in "Annie" to read lines from a script for panelists Lisa Pitliuk, left and Bonnie Brooke, right.

Random Farms Kids Theater, a nonprofit organization, charges a \$125 registration fee for those who are cast in audition-only productions. "Alice in Wonderland" will

be offered as a workshop from June 24 to July 6 in Chappaqua and has open enrollment. For more information, call 914-944-8057 or visit www.rfkt.org.