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Happy Campers Command Stage in Macy's Parade

By Patrick Healy (November 28, 2009)



Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Young performers from Stagedoor Manor, a Catskills theater camp, have their final rehearsal in Manhattan before participating in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Everything was fine with Macy's Santa-sleigh float until the elves showed up.

It was 8 a.m. on Thanksgiving Day, and 15 young children — mostly of Macy's employees — were decked out in red-and-green elf costumes on Central Park West, where the floats were queued for the annual Macy's parade. Also on hand were 20 teenage actors with Stagedoor Manor, a Catskills theater camp, who had spent four days in rehearsal to ride the float and perform in the parade for the first time.

The curveball of elves having dibs to the Santa float might have ruffled your average adolescent eager to have a star turn in a nationally televised parade. But Stagedoor kids are legendary pros. They handled the surprise with poise and humor as they rechoreographed their number to create enough room on the float for the elves, who ended up peppering the actors with questions about how to break into show business.

"This is what live theater is all about, these last-minute changes," said Aaron Albert, 17, who has spent the last six summers at Stagedoor Manor, as he stood atop the float.

"Adjusting a performance is the fun of the experience, but also the terror of it," continued Mr. Albert, who flew in from Los Angeles, where he is a cast member in Disney XD's new musical comedy show "I'm in the Band." "As long as no one falls off the float or throws up, it'll be a success."

No one fell off and no one got sick. (A golf cart did bump into the float and bruised two young women walking beside it.) And at the end of the parade route, just before NBC's coverage wound down, the 20 Stagedoor performers — along with 47 other cast mates from camp who greeted the float there — pulled off their two-minute-plus song-and-dance number, “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” and joined other dancers for Macy's “I Believe” closing anthem.



Amanda Yuan, A. J. Achinger and Avery Adams.
Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

“Our actors were thrilled, we were thrilled, and I think Macy's was thrilled,” said Cindy Samuelson, the producer and owner of the 34-year-old camp, which normally operates only in the summer. “So much went into this first professional outing of ours in New York City since the '70s. I'm so thrilled, and relieved.”

Ms. Samuelson approached Macy's about performing in the parade after watching it last Thanksgiving and thinking that her young actors would be a good fit. Her parents, Elsie and Carl Samuelson, who founded the camp, were longtime fans of the parade, and Stagedoor actors have been known for years for their high caliber: Zach Braff, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Natalie Portman are among the many working alumni.

The camp — which was the setting and inspiration for the 2003 movie called, appropriately, “Camp” — made DVDs of Stagedoor summertime productions for Macy's to consider. Stagedoor produces 15 shows every three weeks, for a total of 45 each summer.



Andrew Kotzen, Chris Murphy and Sara Frost.
Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

In September, Stagedoor was given the go-ahead for the parade, and invited 67 of its campers (from 22 states and three countries) to come to New York to rehearse and perform. Stagedoor charged each actor \$200, which covered only part of the expenses, with the camp picking up the rest.

The rehearsal days in a Midtown Manhattan studio were long, but the young actors were in good spirits during a break on the afternoon before Thanksgiving. The choreography for “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” had changed because it had been running long: a hip-hop-style dance number was excised and a greater emphasis was put on smiling dancers doing more traditional jazzy moves.

“We basically learned two different numbers in four days, but that's not so tough compared to what we do at camp, where we put on major shows in just a few weeks,” said Abby Lett, 16, who is from Dallas and has spent five summers at Stagedoor. (Stagedoor fare is hardly kids' stuff: last summer the camp did “Sweeney Todd” and six other Stephen Sondheim shows in a single weekend.)

The routine itself was like a number out of the television show “Glee,” which was wildly popular among the teenagers. Two adorably sad-faced ‘tweens were told, “You better not pout” by another actor to start off the number, which ultimately included dozens of performers dancing, singing, twirling, dipping and hoisting one another aloft, as well as one boy doing a perfectly executed series of back handsprings.

At the rehearsal and on Thanksgiving morning, several of the actors repeated one another in expressing gratitude for being included in the parade, a memory they said — in the sincere and un-self-conscious way of many actors — that they would cherish for the rest of their lives.

“As much as it’s taught me how to perform, Stagedoor’s mainly given me a place that I can really call home,” said B. J. Myers, 15, who is from Atlanta and has spent two summers at camp. “When I’m out in the real world, I feel very out of place. Everyone out there is the same. No one is really as different as we are. Camp gives us a place to be who we are, who we were born as.”