

The Sondheim Review

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Interview: *Company's* Raúl Esparza

Stagedoor & Sondheim

Imagine a place where everyone loves theatre. A place where everyone lives, breathes and is musical theatre! A place where it's not uncommon to sing the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim, and everyone knows exactly what you're singing about and which show the song is from. No, this is not a fictional story. I'm referring to a special place tucked away in Loch Sheldrake, N.Y., called Stagedoor Manor. Unfortunately for most of us, we're too old to enter!

Stagedoor Manor is a camp for kids ages 8 to 18 who love the excitement of theatre. Doesn't sound like your typical summer camp? Instead of spending time making arts and crafts, these bright young people are honing their craft of performing, taking classes in musical theatre interpretation, dance and even acting, learning theatre process at an early age. (As I learned more about this magical place, I became extremely jealous that I never knew about

Stagedoor as a kid!)

Stagedoor Manor was founded in 1975 by Carl and Elsie Samuelson, who held their first summer camp in 1976. Their daughter, Cindy Samuelson, is now the owner and director of Stagedoor. "When kids come to Stagedoor, it's like landing in the best candy store in the world," says Samuelson. "Every place they turn, everybody knows what they're talking about. When they go around singing, people don't look at them

and go, 'Why are you doing that?'"

Each summer, Stagedoor holds three sessions of camp, each 21 days long. When kids arrive at camp, the first thing they do is audition. The camp directors spend two days casting. Once that process is complete, campers have 19 days of rehearsal that culminate with performances. A typical day includes rehearsals in the morning and the evening, interspersed with classes and recreation throughout the day. Each session has 270 campers, with 155 instructors and faculty members on staff. Stagedoor produces 12 full-scale productions per session.

Of course, what would musical theatre camp be without Sondheim? Sondheim's work has been popular among the campers for 30 years. He has been the most frequently produced musical theatre author in Stagedoor's repertoire, which includes productions of *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Sunday in the*

Park with George, *West Side Story*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Into the Woods*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* and, yes, even *Assassins*.

"He's such an icon to these kids," said Konnie Kittrell, the camp's production director. "When one of Sondheim's shows comes up on the program, it will be the show that kids want to do. We do just about every one that we can." For their 31st season in 2006, Stagedoor is producing *Into the Woods*. Kittrell says the kids are begging to do *Company*.

David Quinn is a Stagedoor alumnus and adviser for the camp. He remembers being a kid and discovering Stagedoor. "I was the kid who would walk down the hall singing 'Pretty Women.'" People would stare at me and ask, 'What is that?' I would get to Stagedoor, and I would go 'Bum bum bum bum bum,' and someone else would go 'bum bum bum bum,' and respond. The next thing I'd know, I'd be singing two-part harmony with someone equally passionate about what they wanted to do."

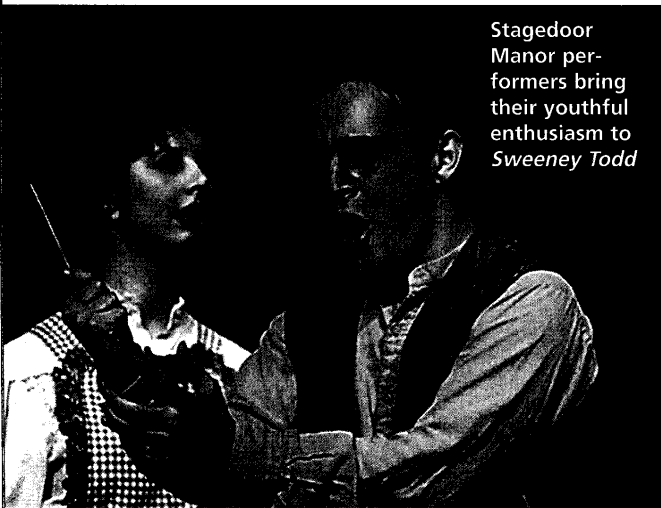
Quinn recalls Stagedoor staging the first production of *Merrily We Roll Along* after Broadway, in which he played Charley Kringas. (He jokes about it also being the first "illegal" production of *Merrily*, as his director decided to run the play's scenes in chronological order.)

Sondheim's work is also studied in some of the classes at Stagedoor, especially the musical theatre interpretation class, where his work continues to be one of the popular subjects.

"Sondheim is a central part of the education of musical theatre," said Samuelson. "Many of our directors have a great passion for Sondheim as well. It's very challenging work, and our kids want to be challenged. I remember watching rehearsals for *Assassins* and being astounded. Not only did they learn very difficult roles, but they also got a history lesson."

Stagedoor recently produced *Sweeney Todd*. Could teenagers relate to the adult material and situations of the demon barber of Fleet Street? "It certainly held its own," says Quinn. "You had two folks in the leads who were as believable as Benjamin Barker and Mrs. Lovett as you could imagine. You have to remember you're casting a 17-year-old in a part made for someone who's twice that age, but who vocally has the chops to do it. So it's simply a matter of getting them to a place where they understand the piece. You walk out of there thinking, 'I'd pay money for that.'"

Many alumni from Stagedoor Manor have gone on to successful careers in theatre, film and television. They include Jon Cryer, Josh Charles, Shawn Levy, Robert Downey Jr., Mandy Moore, Jonathan Marc Sherman, Natalie Portman, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Helen Slater, Zach Braff, Julia Murney and Nicky Silver.



Stagedoor Manor performers bring their youthful enthusiasm to *Sweeney Todd*

PHOTO COURTESY STAGEDOOR MANOR

BY MICAH-SHANE BREWER

“My experience at Stagedoor Manor was, simply put, life-changing,” said playwright Sherman. “It was the first place outside of the actual house I grew up in where I felt at home in the world. Popularity wasn’t based on cosmetic appearances or athletic abilities or bank accounts or anything but talent and humor and intelligence.” Sherman recalls putting on his first original



play at Stagedoor and later submitting it among other scripts to Young Playwrights, Inc., the organization founded by Sondheim. His play *Women and Wallace* was produced by Young Playwrights.

“Since then, I’ve sent Steve drafts of most every new play I’ve written, and he still gives the most honest and helpful notes around. He also wrote my recommendation to graduate school, which in retrospect I treasure far more

than the few months I actually spent at graduate school. So I pretty much blame Stagedoor and Sondheim for most of the good things in my life!”

In 2002, former camper and adviser Todd Graff made *Camp*, a movie loosely based on his experience at Stagedoor as a camper. Graff’s experience mirrored that of many others there in terms of discovering his place. When they were home, they were the drama kids. When they were at Stagedoor, they were normal.

“The thing in common with the kids in the movie is the passion,” says Samuelson. “The camper message board on the Web site shows kids counting down the actual minutes till the camp starts.” (Stagedoor Manor sold out for 2006. Now’s the time to inquire about admission for 2007 at www.stagedoormanor.com.)

Graff shot *Camp* in only 23 days in 2002 at the end of the summer on location at Stagedoor Manor. The camp allowed the director, cast and crew full use of its facilities. In addition, Graff was given permission by Sondheim to feature some of his music in the film’s performances. Sondheim gave Graff access to his songs. After several letters and much begging from Graff, Sondheim agreed to appear in a cameo role written for him, appearing at the end of the campers’ performance.

“While he was at Stagedoor, he declined to stay at one of the local resorts,” said Kittrell. “He wanted to stay where the crew was staying. He wanted to be part of the company. He spent his time there in one of the crew rooms in the technical building.”

Just like in the movie *Camp*, if Sondheim were to make an actual appearance at Stagedoor, the campers would flock to him. “It’s true that kids have his picture in their room,” says Samuelson. After Sondheim was there to film the movie, a plaque was placed in the room where he stayed. The plaque disappears from time to time when a camper decides to take it home. It’s been replaced three times. [TSR]

MICAH-SHANE BREWER is an actor, director and musician from Morristown, Tenn.

since I was a little boy. But I never thought I’d be paid to sing, which is still slightly bizarre to me!”

Having fallen in love with musicals through Sondheim, when he heard that the Donmar was doing *Merrily We Roll Along*, he thought, “I have to play Charley Kringas!” And he got personal tutoring from the composer himself. “The reason why I connect so much with his stuff is that he writes as an actor. When I worked on *Merrily*, I had a one-on-one session on ‘Franklin Shepard, Inc.’ with him. It was absolutely terrifying, but it was also an hour of sheer joy. It was obvious from the notes he was saying that he’d put himself in the place of that character at that point in that character’s life. For me, he writes thoughts. On [*Sunday in the Park with George*], I’ve now just had two hours with him the day before yesterday. We went through the entire score; it was just heaven.”

For Evans, there’s nothing quite like working with the writer, which he has also been able to do with playwrights Peter Gill, Christopher Shinn and the late Sarah Kane. “I have such admiration for those primary creators, be they composers or writers. As an actor, you are just an interpreter.”

He found that Sondheim gave him a completely new perspective on his role. “Stephen is quite strict about meaning. But that appeals to my sense of order. Stephen has completely changed my interpretation of ‘Lesson #8’ now!”

Daniel has also been careful not to merely replicate the performance of Mandy Patinkin. “It’s weird when you’re inside something like this to watch someone else do it like I did with the DVD of the original Broadway production. It was written for Patinkin, and that’s hard — it was written for a specific voice. But unless you do an impression, which I don’t want to do, you have to find your own way. There’s no phoning it in!”

The other danger with this production for Evans is to avoid being upstaged by a video image of himself. “There are times when I thought, ‘Am I being upstaged by a projector here?’ At the *Chocolate Factory*, which is so wide and where the seating is so shallow, I would be doing ‘Putting It Together,’ which is not the easiest lyric in the world to learn or to sing night after night, and I’d be working my arse off, but the entire audience would be looking over there, at another me!

“I usually hate projections in the theatre,” he adds. “If I wanted to go to the cinema, I would have gone there. But it’s our director Sam Buntrock’s great idea to use them here, because what’s nice is that you feel it’s integral to the meaning of the show. They help to show the process of making this piece of art.”

And integral to his own art are his chameleon-like switches between characters, ages and moods. Two-and-a-half years ago, he played a dying, little old Jewish man, Otto Kringelein, in the musical *Grand Hotel* at the Donmar: “I was caked in make-up! It was bizarre when I was cast. I thought, ‘How the hell are we going to do it?’ But you just have to throw yourself in. Some nights I was more successful than others. That’s the other nice thing about being an actor: You can be other people. And that’s nice, isn’t it? Of course, you have to go home at the end of the day and be yourself!” [TSR]

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