

Opening eyes

Stagedoor presents an intensive Sondheim season

Stagedoor Manor sounds too good to be true. Nestled in the Catskill Mountains in Loch Sheldrake, N.Y., Stagedoor has been training up-and-coming triple threats for years. The program was founded by Carl Samuelson in 1975 and counts entertainers including Zach Braff, Mandy Moore, Robert Downey Jr. and Jon Cryer among its distinguished alumni. Each summer, Stagedoor holds three sessions

for young people from ages 10 through 18 to experience professional-level training in acting, singing and dancing. The camp welcomes students from all over the world.

Konnie Kittrell, Stagedoor's production director, says every season has at least one musical from the Sondheim canon.

This year was different, however, with six Sondheim shows in one season. The idea came to Kittrell when she realized that the camp had more than 20 graduating seniors who had worked very hard for the last few years. Each year, the kids turn in requests for shows that interest them. Among the responses Kittrell repeatedly finds "Anything Sondheim."

"Sondheim shows are the most requested by students," she says. "To them, there's musical theatre and then there's Sondheim. The level of respect for his work is incredible. These are the kids who are going to be doing the work. They are cutting their teeth on the music of their role model."

Stagedoor mounted six full-scale musicals for students this summer as a big send-off to the students who had spent numerous summers growing up with theatre. Productions of *Into the Woods* and *A Little Night Music* were performed in the round and posed some real challenges for designers, since the shows shared the same space. *Sweeney Todd* and *West Side Story* played in a more traditional space, the mainstage

theatre. *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was produced in the outdoor theatre, giving it a natural setting for the play. The final piece in the series was *Side by Side by Sondheim*, extremely popular with the kids because of the great storytelling it offers. Overall, 130 students experienced the thrill of performing Sondheim for more than 2,000 people.

Of the many young people to perform in a coveted Sondheim show at Stagedoor, Charlotte Maltby, 16, daughter of Broadway lyricist Richard Maltby, was cast as the Witch in *Into the Woods*. Her father has known Sondheim for more than 40 years and attests to the fact that the composer/lyricist's work is lasting and timeless.

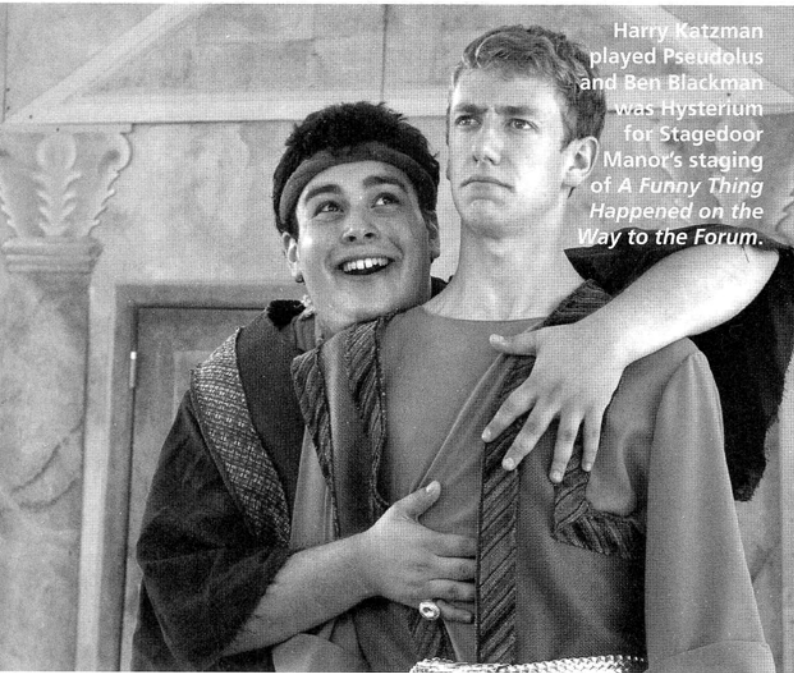
"Steve is a storyteller. He is a playwright. If the script starts heading off someplace, it's the score that pulls it back," Maltby says. "Some of the most complicated shows are the most enduring productions for these kids." But in the role of proud father, Maltby praises the talented and disciplined group of performers. "These kids are incredible. There is a higher effort put forward. It reveals the writing of the show in a way you don't see in a professional production."

Perhaps one might question how effective Sondheim's work can be when a younger cast portray complex characters. With the cream of the crop attending Stagedoor, the standard is entirely different from typical middle or high school productions. "We have very sophisticated kids," Kittrell says. "They find it easier to play the older roles than they do to capture their own age group in shows like *High School Musical* or *Footloose*. They feel more comfortable stepping into a totally different skin. It is a challenge that they desire. It's much easier to put on the cloak of a totally foreign personality than to portray something that is so close to your own skin."

In addition to the ambitious lineup, students also attended classes on Sondheim and participated in Sondheim trivia. One of the many benefits of Stagedoor's concentration on Sondheim is that the older kids had the opportunity to educate the next generation of Sondheim fans.

Sondheim will continue to inspire and excite for years to come. His work challenges those who strive for perfection, which is the very essence of the students at Stagedoor. "When kids are asked to hit that high level, they can't help but have their eyes opened," Maltby says. [TSR]

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Harry Katzman played Pseudolus and Ben Blackman was Hysterium for Stagedoor Manor's staging of *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

PHOTO BY KONNIE KITTRELL