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A New ‘Camp’ for a Fresh Theater-Obsessed Generation

Film director Todd Graff returns to the Catskills theater camp of his youth to conduct research and a master class



Students at Stagedoor Manor Performing Arts Training Center in Loch Sheldrake, N.Y., are introduced last month to Todd Graff, left, who is leading a workshop for his film ‘Camp 2.’ Photo: KONNIE KITTRELL

By Marshall Heyman

During the weekend, the young campers at Stagedoor Manor, a theater camp in Loch Sheldrake, N.Y., ended the summer’s first session with performances of “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” “Sweet Charity,” “Godspell,” “Fiddler on the Roof” and, as is the norm, more obscure shows, such as the flop Broadway musical “Carrie” and “Bare,” a cult favorite about angst at a Catholic school.

But these past few weeks, some of the campers also got to participate in a workshop of “Camp 2,” a sequel to the 2003 independent film “Camp,” about the quirky outsiders at a performing-arts camp much like Stagedoor Manor which was filmed at Stagedoor Manor.

The film’s writer/director, Todd Graff, was a camper there in the mid-1970s, when the place was called Beginners Showcase. He starred as the Artful Dodger in “Oliver,” young Patrick in “Mame” and in three productions of “Jacques Brel Is Alive and Well and Living In Paris” before eventually becoming a counselor and musical director.



From left, Dylan Luce, Todd Graff and McKenna Poe delve into characters from the script for the movie 'Camp 2' at Stagedoor Manor in June.

Photo: KONNIE KITTRELL

Though the film "Camp" grossed less than \$2 million at the domestic box office, it went on to launch the career of the actress Anna Kendrick, who stars in the "Pitch Perfect" franchise, a definite descendant of "Camp."

And the movie, which screened at Sundance, no doubt had some influence on Ryan Murphy, who once interviewed Mr. Graff for Entertainment Weekly and went on to co-create "Glee."

And "Camp" also, of course, effectively raised the profile of Stagedoor Manor.

"When we ask, 'Where did you hear about Stagedoor?' a lot of people will still say they saw the movie 'Camp.'" said Cindy Samuelson, the camp's director who has known Mr. Graff since he was 12. "The legend lives on."

Ms. Samuelson said both the film and the rise of the Internet helped expand the camp's reach. "What happened more than numbers was a wider spread of geography," she said. "Right now we have campers from every continent but Antarctica."

As for revisiting his first feature, Mr. Graff said he had been approached many times to either make a sequel to "Camp" or to develop a version of the project for the stage. "It seems to touch a core in the admittedly small niche of people who saw it," he said. "A dozen years later people still seem connected to it."



A scene from the 2003 film 'Camp' shows, from left, Anna Kendrick as Fritzi Wagner, Joanna Chilcoat as Ellen Lucas, Robin de Jesús as Michael Flores and Tiffany Taylor as Jenna Malloran. Photo: IFC PRODUCTIONS/ENTERTAINMENT PICTURES/ZUMA PRESS

He found that every idea he had for a sequel “was lame or stupid,” until last fall when he realized he could “go meta.” In “Camp 2,” the original “Camp” exists as a movie, and a new batch of fictional campers watch YouTube clips of it. “Half of them think the movie sucked,” said Mr. Graff. “And they complain that now, because there was a movie, everyone comes to the camp who shouldn’t.”

While the original “Camp” had elements of young people letting their freak flag fly, so to speak, now Stagedoor campers perform in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. “It’s less of an undiscovered secret,” Mr. Graff said. “It’s slotted more easily into the culture. You can go to Stagedoor for three weeks, and the next three weeks you do something else.” The writer/director said he explores that issue in the sequel.

Whereas “Camp” had a humorous plotline that referenced “All About Eve,” the sequel has “a kind of cross parody of ‘Sunset Boulevard’ and ‘Phantom of the Opera,’” said Mr. Graff. A former star actress camper lives in the attic of one of the camp’s theaters and takes a handsome camper under her wing to give him acting lessons.

Otherwise, the film simply follows a group of campers through their trials and tribulations. “It’s a little song, a little dance, a little seltzer down the pants,” Mr. Graff said. He plans to finance the movie through a soon-to-launch Indiegogo campaign at Camp2themovie.com and hopes to shoot by next summer.



Joanna Chilcoat as Ellen Lucas in the 2003 comic musical 'Camp.' Photo: IFC PRODUCTIONS/ENTERTAINMENT PICTURES/ZUMA PRESS

Having workshopped the first film in New York City, Mr. Graff thought that spending a few hours over 10 days or so with current Stagedoor campers in the Catskills could help teach him some things.

“History is galloping so fast that this process is helping me keep up,” said Mr. Graff.

The camp immediately agreed. “We’re so theater oriented, so the kids don’t get to work with people who do film work,” said Ms. Samuelson. “I’ve read the script and it’s hysterical, and I’ve got to tell you, I love having former campers here. Todd’s a wonderful teacher.”

During the 10-day master class, Mr. Graff said, he learned “as usual, that I overwrite. Kids emotions are so easily accessible, that what I’ve written three lines for, they get from just looking at another kid.” In turn, Mr. Graff said he expected his script to get shorter.

Mr. Graff, who is in his mid-50s, said he also has found that “I’m older than I think I am.”

“The kids look at me like I’m from the Mesozoic Era.” Some of his references, he said, meant nothing to the teenagers he was working with. For instance, none of the group of 11 students in the master class knew of the musical “Baby,” for which he earned an acting Tony nomination in 1984.



Stagedoor Manor students participate in a 'Camp 2' workshop in June.

Photo: KONNIE KITTRELL

“For them, Jeremy Jordan is the old guard,” Mr. Graff added, referring to the 30-year-old performer who appeared on Broadway in “Newsies” and recently starred opposite Ms. Kendrick in the film version of “The Last Five Years.”

“These are musical theater-obsessed kids so I thought I’d be safe with ‘Sunset Boulevard,’ ” said Mr. Graff. Forget the Billy Wilder movie; Andrew Lloyd Webber wrote the ‘Sunset Boulevard’ musical about 25 years ago, long before the current campers were born.

And the generational gap doesn’t just include musical theater.

“I also felt safe with Lou Reed,” said Mr. Graff. “Apparently I was not safe with Lou Reed.”