

GEORGE ARZT COMMUNICATIONS, INC.
123 WILLIAM STREET, 22ND FLOOR
NEW YORK, NY 10038

TEL: (212) 608-0333
FAX: (212) 608-0458

The New York Times

Sunday, April 3, 2005

The City

Section 14



Lisa Haney

COPING/ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS

Singing, Dancing And Paying Union Dues

A LOT of signs were telling me to do this," the young woman with the knockout smile was saying. "I did a six-show stint over the summer: 'The Sound of Music,' 'Crazy for You,' 'Mame,' 'Oklahoma!' I did 'Music Man' as my first tour. I was blessed with that. A lot of my peers say my technique is great, I'm ready to compete. I've paid my dues, been around the block a little bit."

She is 25 and so are her friends Jason and Gretchen. Only in acting can you say that you've been around the block at 25. To be an actor is to see the hill looming just ahead and to fear that the next time you look up, you'll be over it.

Her professional name is Meegan Midkiff; that's Meegan with two ee's, not one. She has just changed the spelling to match the way she pronounces it, because this show is a foreshadowing of the actress she is becoming; she can feel it.

"Is that the name you would like your checks made out to?" interjected Michael Presser, a pro-

ducer who has been listening in as the three actors take a break from "On the Town" at Ripley-Grier, a Midtown rehearsal factory bathed in the ambient hairspray of a dozen shows. "We'll have to change the program insert," he said solicitously, as an assistant made a note.

Mr. Presser's theater company, Inside Broadway, produces abbreviated versions of Broadway musicals for schools and foundations. Educational theater may be altruistic, but it is hardly a glamour job. Getting up early to sing and dance for a captive audience of bored teachers and recess-starved children in the wilderness of Brooklyn or Queens is not the route to fame and fortune.

So the company lives off actors' good will, sweetened by the promise of an Actors' Equity card. By winning parts in "On the Town," the three young performers automatically got their tickets punched, becoming Equity members and earning "young audience" pay of \$397 a week plus benefits. From now on, they can audition with Equity members instead of going to the end of the line. And in fact, Ms. Midkiff and company will get some Off Broadway exposure when the show is performed at the Lucille Lortel Theater on four Saturdays starting this week.

In a town full of talent, every edge counts, and a union card can be as critical to an actor as to a coal miner or an auto worker. "It's the ultimate goal," Ms. Midkiff, shoulders thrust back, blond tendrils tucked into a wide black hair band, said of her newfound Equity status. "It's a validation. There's also a negative side. A lot of people think if I'm Equity now, that must mean I'm more talented. It's a little vibe which is so not true."

Yet in the flush of victory, it seems inconceivable that she and her friends might someday be not struggling actors but former actors, punching in at office jobs and raising children on the West Side or in Cobble Hill.

They are still fresh, just off the plane.

Ms. Midkiff grew up in Montgomery, Ala., where she went to a performing arts junior high school with Jason Veasey, an Air Force brat who lived most recently in Colorado. Isn't it funny, the two of them say now, that they ended up in the same show? Gretchen Burghart grew up in Springfield, Ill., where her mother owned a dance studio. She performed in the national tour of "Fame" but is relieved to be off the bus-and-tru circuit. "My body hurt all the time from dancing and sleeping on the bus and in different hotels," she said.

In "On the Town," she won the part of Madam Dilly, the dipsomaniac voice teacher, because she was too tired to put on her tights for an early-morning dance call. The ditzy Carol Channing voice didn't hurt either. "It's always the flukes," she says. "My Dad is like: 'Health benefits! Yes!'" Mr. Veasey tagged along to the audition with his two roommates, and the three of them bagged the three male leads.

Luck matters, as does pacing. "A lot of kids go to all the auditions," Mr. Veasey said, "and by Christmastime they want to take 6,000 pills and kill themselves."

They try not to compare themselves with others. "If I see a beautiful woman who's an amazing dancer, a fantastic singer, I tell myself that her light doesn't take away from mine," Ms. Midkiff said. "It's one of my mantras. 'Her light doesn't take away from mine. I have thousands.'"

But don't misunderstand. Cutthroat as it may be, life in the theater is fine at this small moment in New York, with that crisp new card tucked in their wallets. Ms. Burghart wanders the city smiling. "Older women always think something's wrong with me," she said wryly. "They're like, 'Why are you grinning at me?' They're disoriented by a young person being happy."

E-mail: amh@nytimes.com