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Broadway Grows Up

By RALPH GARDNER JR.



Ramsay de Give for The Wall Street Journal

Aliyah Moore, center left, and Fred Arbuckle.

My mother and father were in the theater. Often several times a week. We have the Playbills to prove it. Hundreds of them from the '50s and '60s in neat leather-bound volumes.

And I was a child of Broadway. My first musical was "Carnival," when I was no more than 8 years old, the beauty of the song "Love Makes the World Go 'Round" resonating to this day. I also vividly remember attending "Hair" with my mother. One would probably prefer being with anyone other than one's mother while experiencing one's first nude scene—come to think of it, that was probably the first time I saw a member of the opposite sex naked, period—but better one's parent than not at all. We also saw a revival of "Annie Get Your Gun" with Ethel Merman, who kept her clothes on, but could belt out a song like nobody before or since.



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Joseph Harrington and Nicholas Sipes at 'Creating the Magic.'

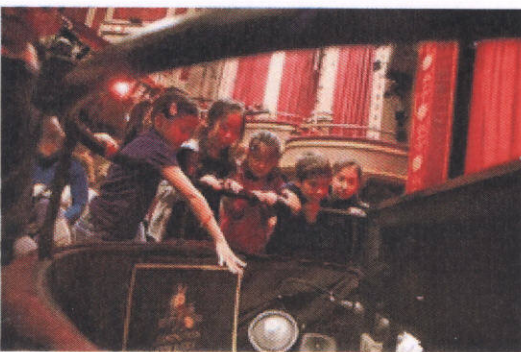
My attendance at Broadway shows has dropped precipitously in recent years, less to waning interest than to soaring ticket prices. (I'm still paying off the loan I took out to treat the family to "Book of Mormon.")

So it felt something less than a homecoming but more than free tickets when I attended the educational non-profit Inside Broadway's "Creating the Magic: Billy Elliot" at the Imperial Theater one morning last week. I joined approximately 1,000 children from public and several parochial schools across the metropolitan area for a behind the scenes look

at all the moving parts of a Broadway show—from lighting to props, and stage managing to sound. The Billy Elliot cast including Katrina Yaukey as Mrs. Wilkinson, two "Billys"—Tade Biesinger and Joseph Harrington—and several of the show's electricians, sound engineers, and prop masters, who under normal circumstances wouldn't be followed around by a spotlight.

I assumed the point of the morning, and of Inside Broadway in general, was to initiate children into the magic of the theater, to plant a seed and get them to dream of someday becoming actors, playwrights, costume designers, etc., or at least engineers and sound technicians. And indeed, Michael Presser, the organization's executive director and the event's master of ceremonies, told me that children who have seen previous year's shows—Inside Broadway is celebrating its 30th anniversary and "Creating the Magic" its 15th season—have gone on to become dancers and stage directors.

But it seems that Inside Broadway's goals are more practical. "That's our audience for the future," Mr. Presser explained as we stood backstage while the house filled with children, from 8- to 18-year-olds. "It's important to have people on the stage, but even more important to have people in the seats."



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Children inspect the staging.

I didn't want to be a Debbie Downer but I felt obligated to observe that current ticket prices, as delightful and often moving as the theater can be, may eventually put the experience out of reach for all but the most successful hedge-fund managers and Russian oligarchs.

"It's a larger discussion about the ticket prices," he said. "There are discounts available. There's the Internet, the TKTS booth in Times Square."

But why dwell on the negative, especially with the curtain about to rise. Actually, there was no curtain to raise. The concept, after all, is that this was to be a backstage experience, even if the actual backstage was too small to accommodate all of us. We sat facing the stage and beyond it the theater's stark rear brick wall. But the dimming of the houselights nonetheless evoked screams of anticipation, and I can confidently state that there's no more receptive audience anywhere than kids who get to play hooky from school legally.

Mr. Presser emerged from the wings and taught us a little of the Imperial Theater's history.



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Zoe Lazar, Isabelle Stern, and Stella Kirschner.

"Carousel," "Oliver," "Fiddler on the Roof," "Cabaret," "Les Miserables," and "Dreamgirls," have all played there, though only "Dreamgirls" seemed to trigger a reaction. A later mention of "Legally Blond," in what context I can't recall, also set off respectful gasps.

The "Billy Elliot" cast didn't perform the whole show, only a couple of numbers, but that didn't seem to matter. In the age of "Angry Birds," who has the patience, anyway, to sit through an entire Broadway musical, certainly before snack?

After a spirited rendition of "Born to Boogie," the cast, which included Thommie Retter, a solidly built gentleman with a bit of a belly but who nonetheless confounded the laws of physics with his break-dance moves, introduced themselves. Mr. Retter told the kids that he was teaching adult tap dance in LA when his big break came.

We also heard from show stage manager Bonnie Becker who explained, "When you see the lights change, the scenery, it's because I told them what to do," and from Chad Heulitt, a production carpenter.

One of the responsibilities of adulthood is to constrain ones' emotions, even in the face of the amazing. But children are under no such obligation. So when Mr. Heulitt gave the signal and a two-story combination kitchen/spiral staircase/sleeping loft popped out of a hole in the center of the stage, reaction was appropriately appreciative.

And we were just getting started. Ms. Yaukey belted out her solo number, "Shine," deck electrician Peter Donovan gave a spirited lighting demo, which included cueing some fog, and "Billy" Joseph Harrington returned for the grand "Dream Ballet" finale, which included flying above the stage while suspended from a wire.

"It was really scary when I first started, and I'd dread the moment," Mr. Harrington, 12, told the kids in a subsequent Q&A. "It's not scary at all any more. It's really fun."

He and the other Billy, Tade Biesinger, also 12, talked about the months of rehearsal, line memorization, and acting and stamina-building tap and ballet direction that all Billys (there are four of them) undergo before they play to a live audience. All while keeping up their studies (obviously!) with the help of a backstage tutor.

On the way out the children seemed thrilled with the experience, a few undoubtedly already dreaming of the spotlight themselves. But first things first. "Who needs the bathroom?" demanded Gina Goodman, a teacher at P.S. 77 in Manhattan, who wouldn't take no for an answer before her class boarded the bus back to school. "Who needs the bathroom?"

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