

# ASSOCIATED MUSICIANS OF GREATER NEW YORK

## Allegro

Current: Volume 117 No. 8 September, 2017

Thousands of kids learn about Broadway during three jam-packed sessions

by Bettina Covo



Local 802 members from Broadway's "Phantom of the Opera" give visiting schoolchildren an inside look at a musical theatre production.

The end of the 2017 school year was a busy time for Nick Sala, creator and producer of Inside Broadway's successful Creating the Magic programs. Per usual, three Creating the Magic events were scheduled for the school year. These educational and entertaining presentations are the highlight of the season for the public school students invited to this unique behind-the-scenes look at a Broadway show. But this year, due to scheduling difficulties, the last two presentations fell within one week of each other, making for a whirlwind tour-de-force season finale.

In spring, 1,600 excited public school students stepped behind the curtain of the classic John Kander and Fred Ebb musical "Chicago" at the Ambassador Theater. "Chicago" is unique on Broadway partly because the orchestra performs on stage for the entire show. The students, most of whom have never experienced a Broadway production, were able to experience the synergy of musicians and actors simultaneously interacting live on stage. That alone made this presentation exceptional.

The actor who currently plays the character Roxie, Mexican-born Bianca Marroquín, kicked off the event with her character's namesake song. Marroquín proudly reminded the audience that she is the first person from Mexico who has been cast in a lead role on Broadway. The character Velma, played by South African-born Amra-Faye Wright, smiled wryly as she spoke to the students about the power of immigrants in the theatre. The two ladies made a formidable duo.





Local 802 members Scott Cady (piano), Ray Cetta (bass/tuba) and Tony Tedesco (drums) accompanied the actors, led by conductor/music director Leslie Stifelman. Stifelman spoke to the students about the colorful use of ragtime that helps maintain the decisively vaudeville flavor of the show. When asked about her role as conductor, Stifelman was emphatic: "I like being the boss and I like being the boss of the musicians." To help demonstrate that point, she raised her hands, cued the students to start applauding and then gave them a clear cut off as the house went silent. Such is the power of the conductor.

The dance captain and others from the backstage crew came out to talk about the choreography, lighting, sound, and other stagecraft for this singularly minimalist production. The students observed firsthand how something that appears so simple requires a carefully coordinated team of extremely talented and skilled people on and off stage who endeavor to present a flawless performance each and every show.

Creating the Magic events take a great deal of planning and coordination, so producing two within a week of each other is no simple feat. Yet, without skipping a beat, Sala and team launched their final show without a hitch at the Majestic Theatre, for Andrew Lloyd Webber's iconic musical "Phantom of the Opera."

In stark contrast to the minimalist approach of "Chicago," the cast and crew of "Phantom" transported 2,500 students on a captivating tour of some of the production's complex props and stage sets replete with candelabras that magically appear out of the floor, floating gondolas that sail across the stage and, of course, the famous chandelier that soars up to the ceiling.

Creating the Magic usually employs a rhythm section of piano, bass and drums for these educational events. Luckily for this group of students, the producers felt it was important to maintain the show's sweeping operatic style. So, of the 27 musicians who play "Phantom" nightly, Local 802 members Joyce Hammann (violin), Karl Bennion (cello), Daivd Lai (piano) and conductor Richard Carsey were on hand to accompany the actors. Adding the strings was a pleasant change.

It has become customary for the music director or conductor to address the audience on behalf of Local 802 and the musicians. But this time, all four musicians were invited up on stage for a brief discussion about the role of the orchestra and the conductor. Hammann introduced herself, holding up her instrument to ask if anyone in the audience knew what she held in her hand. A large number of students proudly and rather loudly proclaimed, "A violin!"

Inside Broadway understands that this kind of interaction with the musicians themselves reinforces the connection between musician and musical. Hopefully, it will be the start of a new paradigm for these events.

Inside Broadway's Executive Director, Michael Presser served as MC for both shows, deftly guiding the audience on a grand tour behind the curtain to explore and discover the multiple aspects of producing a Broadway show. Together with the actors, musicians, stage managers and the various crew members, the students were happily swept up in the whirlwind that is live Broadway. Bravo to everyone at Inside Broadway!