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When Grade Schools Stage Musicals, It's Broadway or Bust ...

By: Erin DeGregorio

Word count: 3,103

St. Ephrem School, in Dyker Heights, Brooklyn, has never had an extensive performance arts program for its student body. The nursery-through-eighth-grade Catholic school was built in 1922. It's historically been known for its parish athletics program, winning multiple championship titles in swimming, baseball and basketball, receiving top awards in cheerleading, and lettering in track and field. But recently, families and administration have embraced different creative outlets for students to participate in after school. Along with the parish children's choir program and in-school music program, St. Ephrem's now also offers a bell choir, a band program and – as of Fall 2016 – a drama club. But it's not your mediocre school drama club, putting on simple pageants and such. It's more like Broadway Lite – and it's part of a cross-country wave of professionalization hitting grade-school plays.

Parent Mary Donnelly was the initial catalyst for St. Ephrem's journey into a world of musical stagecraft that has turned out to be complicated, elaborate and expensive. It all started with "The Lion King JR.," a child-friendly version of Disney's "The Lion King," which Donnelly saw in April 2016 at nearby elementary school, St. Patrick's Catholic Academy. She felt St. Ephrem's should have this kind of extracurricular activity too. (Her children, Elizabeth and Matthew, are now in the fifth and fourth grades, respectively, at St. Ephrem.) So she proposed the idea of a drama club to the school principal, Craig Mercado, in September 2016.

"Honestly we have a lot of kids in St. Ephrem who are very athletic," Donnelly says. "We offer wonderful programs, but they don't offer so many programs for the non-athletes with all the clubs, so this was the first open door for drama to come in."

After looking around online and in the neighborhood, Mercado approached Susan Huizinga last year to become the school's play program director. Huizinga, who at 64 has the spirit and energy of a teenager, was not a faculty member at the school, assigned to coach the kids in drama. Rather, she's an "outside expert" – a mediator between schools and Broadway licensing companies. She transformed her life-long love for theatre into a money-making business in 2015 by creating the "Theater on the Go!" company. She has directed and produced more than 40 shows at various community theaters, private and public grade schools and high schools in Southern Brooklyn. Her specialty is working with schools that have never put on a show and helping them put one together from scratch.

Says Huizinga, "What I bring is a very high level of theatrical sophistication to schools with little or no budget and resources to put on a play."

When working with any school, Huizinga first sits down to pick a title that both kids and parents will recognize. These days, that usually means scaled-back versions of Broadway shows that are themselves spun off from already-popular movies. The Walt Disney Company is especially good at creating and marketing this kind of material for schools. Shows with a lot of characters and flexible casting options, Huizinga finds, give the kids opportunities to have a singing solo or dance solo during a major number. Once set on the show, she then begins the process of

preparing for production, which includes obtaining copyright permission, via licensing, from Musical Theatre International (MTI) to put on the pared-down show. But, as it turns out, navigating the world of show-to-school licensing is quite complex and quite a business proposition.

MTI is one of the largest and oldest licensing agencies of theatre musicals. It licenses its 400-plus titles to nearly 70 countries. It provides custom material for a wide range of titles that have been on Broadway (like “Avenue Q,” “Fame,” and Disney’s “The Little Mermaid”) and those that have never been professionally staged in a major city (like Disney’s “James and the Giant Peach,” “The Aristocats” and “High School Musical”).

While it licenses full-length shows for productions put on by adult regional groups and community theatres and concert versions of musical-show scores, a good deal of MTI’s business is in licensing specialized, re-adapted material specifically aimed at grade schools and high schools – in so-called kid and junior versions. MTI partnered with Disney in 2004 and is the exclusive worldwide secondary rights representative of Disney Theatrical Productions for shows that have been performed on Broadway and movies that have not hit the stage. The Disney Theatrical Group has issued licenses for over 40,000 Disney youth musicals worldwide since 2005, according to Ken Cerniglia and Lisa Mitchell, managers of the Disney Theatrical Group.

Freddie Gershon, a longtime music lawyer and the current chairman of MTI, initially conceived the idea for kid and junior shows in 1996 and began to publish the Broadway Junior series of musicals in 1998. These shows would not introduce and depict the children of beloved characters we have come to know and love; rather, the shows were meant to be condensed, kid-friendly adaptations of Broadway scripts and stories that kids could relate to and enjoy playing characters in, with the whole show lasting only about an hour. According to Gershon’s personal website, the junior versions of Broadway works for elementary and middle schools were “re-thought with musical keys designed for age appropriate vocal range and materials abbreviated with cross-curricula guides to tie the musicals into their academic subjects and into the entire school community.”

MTI specifically targets its junior-show packages to grade schools by appealing to parents and their children with familiar household titles they’ve grown up with, including “Curious George,” Disney’s “Aladdin” and “Peter Pan,” and more. All these junior shows either already have kid-friendly storylines or, if they originally featured more mature content, are reworked to be more appropriate for a younger audience. The junior scripts and musical scores provided are first developed and worked on with each musical’s composer, lyricist, and librettist, and go through multiple table readings and workshops before being released to the public. Eventually these end products are written specifically for an average middle aged-youth’s reading level, emotional maturity level and vocal abilities.

Result: A tidal wave of Disney-branded and/or Broadway-pedigreed material in grade schools around the country. More than 300,000 junior performances have taken place in the U.S. since the inception of the program – and just since 2013, more than 40,000 of those have been Disney JR. titles.

Every one of these school productions involves a considerable monetary outlay. A typical Broadway Junior performance license used to cost \$395, according to a *Billboard* article from 2001. But according to John O'Connor, the lead amateur licensing representative at MTI's New York City headquarters, licensing costs for their hour-long elementary school productions now run between \$550 and \$795. Here's how it works: First, an accredited grade school (high schools can't license Junior shows) or a play producer, like Huizinga, creates an online MTI account to purchase such licenses. They look at the list of 50-plus elementary shows that are available. Once the show is chosen, they receive a flat-rate contract offer from MTI with the licensing fee and ShowKit fee listed and combined together. A standard ShowKit, which provides the supplementary materials needed to put on a show, includes a media disc with helpful files and forms, a piano/vocal score, two rehearsal/accompaniment vocal CDs, a choreography DVD, 30 student actor scripts, 30 parent's guides and a director's guide that contains production suggestions. If the producers agree, the license and production contracts are signed and payment is made in full on their end, which secures them the right to put on the productions as many times as they like within 365 days. From there the ShowKits are delivered to the school by postal mail one to two weeks after the signed license is returned to MTI.

Derek Miller is a theatre historian and associate English professor at Harvard University who specializes in Broadway, musical theater and contemporary off-Broadway theater. He has studied theatre licensing and has found that it's easier now for everyday people to put on shows. He says license packages from decades ago only included scripts and scores, which were marked up in pencil, erased and immediately sent back to the licensing agency once a production was finished.

"Now they'll send you a full CD – which used to be a tape or record – of the orchestra music, [plus] costume designs, scenery designs, full direct blocking information, and a million other things to help you do your show," Miller says. "What they're selling you is no longer just the script. They're selling you the production."

Once all the arrangements are made with MTI, schools and play producers, like Huizinga, usually begin to prep for their auditioning and casting processes.

Huizinga decided in August 2017 that the St. Ephrem drama club would perform "Elf the Musical JR." It was decided that this year's production would be held on the weekend of December 8-10, before the school's Christmas vacation. This musical version, which slightly differs from the 2003 film of the same name, follows Buddy the Elf, a child raised at the North Pole, on his journey to find his biological father during Christmastime in New York City. As it happens, "Elf the Musical" was the number one trending play in the "Callboard" sidebar on MTI's website for the week of November 26, since it is an appropriate storyline for this time of year.

Unlike last year, Huizinga reached out to a faculty favorite to also participate in the show. She feels that the kids love it when a staff member is involved because, according to her, they "get such a kick out of it" and it makes rehearsing more fun. Teacher Richard Diffendale, 33, says he was surprised when Huizinga approached him to play Walter Hobbs, Buddy the Elf's biological father, for two of the show dates.

Though the students know him as the junior high teacher for social studies and science, it turns out that he's no stranger to the stage – he's the lead singer of his own band, Whole in One. Diffendale also shared that it's been 20 years since he made his acting debut and portrayed Slippery Sam Slattery in his eighth grade classroom play of "The Castaways" when he was a student at St. Ephrem's.

"It's like I never left," says Diffendale. "When I performed in eighth grade I was the shortest kid on stage. Today I was one of the tall ones."

When Huizinga confirmed Diffendale's participation and held student auditions on September 8, parent Theresa Walsh believed it would be beneficial for her son Eamon, 12, to try out. He wound up landing Buddy, the lead role, for two of the four shows.

"He tends to be on the lazy side sometimes," Walsh says of Eamon. "I thought it would be good for him to do something else after school, something structured – instead of playing video games."

But giving kids the opportunity to be socially and physically active after school can be costly. For every student cast at St. Ephrem – this year there are 28 actors, plus 5 stage crew members – parents have to pay a \$100 fee per child to cover participation, no matter how small the role or crew job. If families have more than two children participating – like the Donnellys, for instance – then it's like a B.O.G.O. deal – 'buy one, get one' half off – to pay \$150 total, instead of \$200.

This fee is similar to the standard registration fees for the various sports that are offered at the parish (competitive swimming, flag football, basketball, baseball and softball) and outside of it (like dance, tennis, soccer and volleyball). And that registration payment often doesn't include uniform fees or equipment purchases. The biggest cost, though, is typically the costuming, which could add up to a few hundred dollars more. And with so many children in the cast, sometimes signals get crossed along the way during preparation.

"I didn't even know my daughter was also an elf until around Veteran's Day [a month before opening night], so I had to overnight ship the costume and go out to Gap Kids for leggings," says Brenda Avignone. (Her seventh-grade daughter Jolie was cast to play Emily Hobbs, Buddy the Elf's step-mother.) "Plus [Huizinga] said the dress I bought for the Emily character was not Christmas-y enough. So I went out to different stores to find and buy another one."

Because Huizinga has cast virtually every child in the "Elf JR." show in two different roles at different performances – which increases participation and, not incidentally, also increases ticket sales – the cost of costuming all these children twice threatened to spin out of control. Some stretched parents finally put their foot down about it (especially since last year, their first production of Disney's "Aladdin JR." had pushed some of them to budgets as high as \$250 for a single kid's ensembles). So, for "Elf," Huizinga has required that only the three main leads (Buddy the Elf, Jovie and Santa Claus) have to purchase specific costumes or make outfits from scratch that resemble those from the 2003 movie. The Buddy outfit costs \$40 on Amazon; the Jovie elf costume costs \$28 online without shipping and handling; and the classic Santa suit costs

\$29 online with free shipping. The rest of the cast, who mainly made up the ensemble of Santa's workshop elves and background New York City residents, wore identical elf costumes purchased from Amazon (about \$30 without shipping and handling) and winter apparel from their own wardrobes. Parent Mary Donnelly ordered Santa Claus hats and aprons in bulk for the entire ensemble as well – “to make it as easy as possible, to be in sync and be as economical as possible so nobody feels left out or stands out in a different way,” she says.

“I'm looking forward to kinda being the main attraction where everyone can see me – because in ‘Aladdin’ I was the narrator and we were all in similar costumes and you couldn't really tell which person was which,” says Elizabeth “Liza” Donnelly, 10, who plays Jovie, Buddy the Elf's girlfriend. “And I'm looking forward to ‘Elf’ because everyone's their unique person and I'll be the one everyone will be looking at most of the time.”

To further limit overall costs, showrunner Huizinga heavily relies on volunteer work and a team effort attitude from parents. Mother Denise Stroffolino, for example, was backstage for all four performances, ready with a small sewing kit in case any buttons came loose or if any costumes needed hemming. Some mothers also helped the girls with hair and makeup before and during each performance. Hediye Sayar, grandmother to fourth grader Samantha Sayer, decorated the elves' aprons with ribbons and mini bows, which made them look like kid bakers and toy makers. Fourth grade father Rob Genovese purchased art supplies to draw and make four-foot-tall cardboard stand-ups of Santa's sleigh, the North Pole sign and the Christmas Angels at Rockefeller Center.

Electrician Peter Colavito, whose daughter Annabelle, 13, worked behind-the-scenes in stage crew, offered and operated his lighting and sound equipment for free for the drama club to use last year – and did so again for “Elf JR.” The equipment included a soundboard and equalizer, light fixtures, dimmer packs and boards, extension cords, speakers, and microphones with accompanying stands and cables – which would have run a total rental cost between \$500 and \$700 for the two days to set-up and three show days. Colavito says the labor he volunteered to run the equipment is worth an additional \$1,500 to \$2,500.

All that free labor greatly helps in defraying costs for Huizinga. Last year's “Aladdin JR.” had a total production budget of about \$7,000, but it easily could have more than tripled to a cost of \$24,000 without volunteer equipment and labor. Huizinga says she raised half of that reduced budget through the student-participation charges (34 students times \$100 each, or \$3,400). The remaining \$3,600 came from selling ads in the playbill program, 50/50 raffles, concession sales, t-shirt sales and ticket sales.

The “Elf JR.” production only just ran on December 8, 9 and 10, so Huizinga hasn't yet crunched the numbers and determine exact costs. But she estimates it will be slightly lower than “Aladdin JR.,” since they used fewer props and didn't need as much background scenery. This year fifth grade mother Gisele Manfredi was responsible for creating a merchandise table that would raise money and further defray production costs. She sold Santa Claus hats, plush elves, red-and-white-striped knee-high tube socks, official “Elf, JR.” shirts and cookies decorated like Buddy the Elf's green hat (which were baked and packaged by faculty member Anna Acetta) to audience members.

Of course, all that work on lights, costumes and sets doesn't do much good if the performers on stage aren't appealing – and ready for the public on opening night. Making that successfully happen, Huizinga says, is an extremely demanding part of the process.

“Singing is no problem,” she says. “But their dialogue voices are still low and they talk fast – whether that's from nerves or just inexperience, since some are new to the club.”

The 28 shining stars of “Elf the Musical JR.” practiced twice a week after school, for a total of five hours per week, for two months since the end of September when the cast was determined. They also practiced for a total of 16 hours after school during tech week – the four days for the full company to practice the entire show with some of parent Colavito's equipment.

But because the rehearsal space was the school's gymnasium, it was tough for Huizinga to secure and reserve times and days for practice. The gymnasium is also used for school-related events, community functions, after-school sports practices and weekend sports games.

“That is one of the biggest issues for us,” Huizinga says with a shrug. “Where and when can we go?”

To make up for lost time, she told the kids to continually memorize and practice their scripts, songs, choreography and on-stage blocking positions at home with family or other cast members. Two weeks prior to opening night, Huizinga also arranged more rehearsal slots, with additional days and hours for the kids to work on portions of the musical that were still shaky, like lines and cues. As the days dwindled down, the cast and parents realized all their hard work and efforts would pay off in the shows.

“My kids have been singing and dancing [at home] since they had the drama try-outs,” says parent Mary Donnelly. “The registration was \$150, but for the amount of hours they put in, it's worth the parents' every penny for what they're really getting out of it.”