

“Annie” Brings Down the House

Abbott House, that is. Along with its engaging first time musical theater production, Music in Chappaqua generously reaches out to children in crisis and their foster families.

BY CHERYL EHRLICH



Most community theater productions are a labor of love. But Music in Chappaqua's recent production of “Annie” took love to a new level.

“Annie” was Music in Chappaqua's first foray into musical theater.

The school, located on South Greeley Avenue, began in 1993, with founder and director Janet Angier giving piano lessons in her basement apartment. It now boasts dazzling, state-of-the-art sound studios, complete with gleaming Steinway pianos, Internet access to student's favorite music, microphones, DVD recorders, and other high-tech equipment.

The school primarily offered piano, string, and voice lessons until this year. Angier had wanted to augment music lessons with “an educational component.” At the same time, students and parents expressed a desire to apply their studies to something meaty, like a performance. So Angier and faculty member John Fanelli began talking about putting on a

show. It was a new world for Angier, whose classical performance background includes a double major in piano and oboe at the New England Conservatory of Music. She had performed around the world with such groups as The Vienna Symphonietta and the Taiwan National Symphony. Yet she had little exposure to musical theater. But when she and Fanelli considered “Annie,”

“BING! It hit a heart string.” In a moment she envisioned a production that gave both to the young actors involved and to the community.

Striking a Chord

“The idea of art being able to do something for society” spoke to Angier. The Strouse/Charnin/Meehan musical based on the Depression-era comic strip Little Orphan Annie “is not a documentary or a lecture, but an entertaining evening with a deeper meaning, if people are open to it.”

Angier sees the show as a way to remind people that, even in this age of affluence, there are still plenty of children like the orphans depicted in the show. “What a great opportunity to raise awareness,” she added. “There are children out there who still need foster parents. There always will be.”

Angier is uniquely sensitive to these issues, having been raised in a succession of foster homes. She recalls those years with a mixture of strong

emotions. “I don't know how many homes I was in,” she mused. “I don't know how many names I had. I never had a birth certificate.”

The Chappaqua businesswoman, wife, and mother of two keenly remembers the “floating” years of foster homes, and how isolating they were.

Being chosen for adoption helped allay that sense of being different. In a loving and stable environment, as a young teen, she was able to channel her many talents into performing, and teaching piano to others. Angier even became a competitive high diver, before focusing on her music. To mentor the young actors involved in her production, Angier cast adults with professional stage training in key roles. Their stage presence and performances enhanced the production and provided role models for the children.

“Annie survives in spite of her circumstances. She helps other people. She brings life into Daddy Warbucks' life. I want to show kids that it's not your circumstances, it's your spirit—hold onto that. If I can share that message, or just give people a good night out, it's a pleasure.”

Janet Angier

"This way the students get to see what makes a solid performance," she noted. On the labor side of this labor of love, Music in Chappaqua was itself mentored by Jon Moses, co-founder of Westchester's Saw Mill Summer Theatre. His extensive experience smoothed the path in complex areas like publicity, sets, and the technical values of the production, such as working Seven Bridges Middle School's state-of-the-art sound system. Westchester's community theater network enabled Angier and Fanelli to rent, among other things, a period wheelchair for FDR, bunkbeds for the orphans, and a Christmas tree. The talented retriever playing Annie's dog, Sandy, was a bonus that came with the show's costume designers, Debralee and Lois Krobotzky.

Giving to Kids in Need

But Angier's vision extended beyond the footlights. With rehearsals underway, she got in touch with Abbott House, a human services agency in Irvington serving families in crisis, and neglected and abused children (www.abbotthouse.net).

I asked them if they could use some free tickets, Angier recalled. "They called back in 15 minutes and asked for 100." In total, Angier gave away more than 150 tickets, to children in Abbott House programs and foster parents.

The show could be very moving to children who have moved around so much they haven't even had a chance to feel safe in their homes, Angier explained.

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Abbott House, in operation since 1963, currently cares for over 1,200 children and young adults throughout Westchester, as well as New York City, Rockland, Dutchess, Putnam, Orange and beyond. A top priority is reuniting families whenever possible. But a child may be in foster care for as much as two years. "Kids don't ask for this," said Brenda Wilkins, community relations representative

from Abbott House.

"Foster parents are angels, giving these children a stable environment until they can return to their own parents or find a long-term placement. Adults also volunteer to help children with their homework, or take them out for day trips. Abbott House was thrilled to receive the theater tickets. We were just kicking off our Neighbors for Neighbors campaign, when Janet so graciously reached out to us. The kids of the Abbott House community don't have the opportunity to go to the theater very often. This will create a family event for them and build positive memories," said Wilkins.

We Are Your Neighbors

On opening night, Abbott House Homefinding Supervisor Joyce Sayre Kelly thanked Music in Chappaqua for dedicating their performances to the children of Abbott House.

"We are your neighbors," she pointed out to the audience. Abbott House is currently seeking all forms of involvement, including donors, volunteers, mentors, and foster parents. Vincent Price, coordinator of Abbott House's Residential Treatment Center in Irvington, chaperoned a group of Abbott House children to the show. Their reaction?

"They had a real good time," Price affirmed. "They enjoyed the music.



It was a good story." Was it tough for the children to watch orphans depicted in song and dance? Or perhaps it was inspirational? The boys hadn't lingered on that particular point, Price said. "Mostly they were baffled at how well the dog behaved on stage."

CHERYL EHRLICH, a mother of three and a former president of the erstwhile Chappaqua Drama Group, had the distinct pleasure of co-producing their "Annie," and living to tell about it.

Chappaqua Volunteer Ambulance Corps Seeks New Members

New Castle residents can make a wonderful decision to help save a life.

The Chappaqua Volunteer Ambulance Corps (CVAC) seeks members for this vital service to the community. The Corps, comprised completely of volunteers, responds to emergency calls within New Castle, including Chappaqua, Millwood and outlying parts of Pleasantville, Mount Pleasant and Mount Kisco. They are dispatched when someone calls 911 or the New Castle Police.

Medical service is provided by Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) assisted by adult aides and youth corps members. CVAC handles over 450 calls a year and has about 40 EMTs, 10 adult aides and a 16-member youth corps. Prior experience not necessary—just a desire to help.

For information on joining, please call Joe Semel, Captain, 238-9006.