



From There to Here, From Here to There

A Broadway team and Newtown students produce an inspiring *Seussical*

John Tartaglia as the Cat in the Hat with Nicole Kolitsas as JoJo in the 1214 Foundation's production of *Seussical the Musical*

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High school presentations of *Seussical: The Musical*, the Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty musical based on the famed children's books by Dr. Seuss, are not unusual, but a production this past August staged by the 1214 Foundation in Newtown, Conn., certainly was special. Bringing together several Broadway names with the town's students, the 1214 Foundation presented *Seussical* as the inaugural production of what it hopes will become an annual benefit event. The group is raising funds to build a performing arts center in the town as an ongoing tribute to help the community deal with the tragic event at the Sandy Hook Elementary school through the optimism of the arts.

"It was suggested that since the building will probably take five years, that we should do something in the interim; to keep the flame of the whole thing alive," says renowned lighting designer and theatre consultant Richard Pilbrow, who sits on the 1214 Foundation's board. "We are at the early stages of doing studies for the building, it's a very ambitious plan, but it's very exciting to be involved right at the start. It's one of the more important things I've been involved with. It's aimed at the next generation and it will hopefully be a place for people to perform, study, and learn. Doing productions now, not waiting for the building, is a way to keep the community interested and involved. We want to do shows on a regular basis. It was [director] Michael Unger who came up with the idea of doing a production of *Seussical*. It's a wonderful choice of show and everyone was very generous with their time and talents. The production was terrific; it was an amazingly exciting evening. Four sold-out evenings actually."

Wanting to offer the Newtown students an opportunity to work with and learn from theatre professionals, the 1214 founder and executive producer for the show, Newtown resident Dr. Michael Baroody, recruited the Tony Award-winning producer Van Dean (*Cinderella*, *Porgy and Bess*, *Matilda*). Van Dean brought in director Michael Unger (Broadway's *Steel Pier* and *Buried Child*), musical director Jeffrey Saver (Broadway's *End of the Rainbow*, *Chicago*, *Sister Act*), and choreographer Jennifer Paulson Lee (*City of Angels* at Goodspeed, *Annie Get Your Gun* at Lincoln Center). Unger assembled his design and production team also from working Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theatre professionals including lighting designers Herrick Goldman and Susan Nicholson, sound designer Simon Matthews, costume designer Kristina Sneshkoff, production manager D.J. Haugen, and production stage manager Becca Hernan. Production Resource Group, Rose Brand, Sapsis Rigging, and One

Dream Sound provided production support and equipment.

Tony Award nominee John Tartaglia (*Avenue Q*) starred as the Cat in the Hat, leading the cast that featured 82 students from the Newtown area ranging in age from 5 to 18. A few days before opening night, Unger described the emotion of working on the show, saying, "The kids have been so eager; rehearsals have been a joy. The show itself is about joy and imagination but we are also finding some really poignant moments because the show has those as well. We are all focused on helping everyone move on and this is about how you can use the performing arts to keep yourself active, creative, hoping, and moving forward. It has been an amazing experience."

In addition to the student performers, *Seussical* also offered nearly 20 apprenticeship positions to junior and senior high school students in direction, choreography, musical direction, stage management, stage crew, lighting design, prop construction, costume design and construction, sound design, and technical direction. "We are treating this as a professional production," states Unger. "Everyone is getting the experience of what is expected working on a Broadway show both onstage and behind the scenes."

To coordinate the ambitious technical aspects of the production on a tight schedule with the young crew Unger called in D.J. Haugen. "He is amazing, nothing fazes him," notes Unger. "DJ is a really good production manager and he's great working with the kids. I can't tell you how vital he has been to making this happen. He always says yes, and that is not easy in a situation like this when yes means it is going to fall onto you, but he says yes and gets it done." Haugen managed all of the technical details, various vendor deliveries and figured out how to incorporate the professional gear into the technically basic Newtown High School auditorium. He even found storage for all the lighting and sound road cases by arranging for access to classroom spaces, which he also used to create a temporary costume construction shop.

Haugen and a parent drove to Massachusetts to collect the set, which was donated by Indian Hill Music School in Littleton, Mass. He then widened the narrow set, constructing additional scenic elements. The production team even discovered two talented students, perhaps future scenic artists. The two high school students were able to paint the new set extensions so that they seamlessly blended with the original scenic art done at Indian Hill by illustrator Leanne Leutkemeyer. Unger decided to place the orchestra upstage and had Haugen and the crew built a downstage thrust that afforded the director more room to have additional kids onstage.



Director Michael Unger



Newtown students in the *Seussical* chorus

It fell to Becca Hernan as the production stage manager to keep track of and schedule all those kids. During a well-deserved, but short, break in rehearsal she explained the unique challenge (and rewarding experience) of merging the professional approach with the novice cast. "Coordinating and communicating have been the big things. There are 86 members in our cast and 90% of them cannot drive themselves. When I send out a rehearsal schedule it goes to 130 people: cast, parents, etc. In addition to all the normal questions I would get as a stage manager, I also get a lot of transportation questions about drop-off and pick-up arrangements. In the first week there were also questions about how to read the schedule. But everyone has been really excited to learn how a show like this all comes together. For me it has been amazing to work with the kids. It has been unexpected how rewarding it is working with them and teaching them; they are so invested in learning everything."

For the lighting design, Unger wanted to bring in someone who would be a good fit for the unique production. "In assembling the team, knowing the fast schedule, using a student crew, and having zero money, it was important to have people that could go with the flow," points out Unger, "people that were very talented, generous, and also easy going. Herrick and Susan certainly fit that bill. They are one of the great lighting teams in theatre. They have creative minds, they're fast, and they can deal with change. They understood the vision of this project right away."

Goldman recalls, "Michael told me that it would be a tight schedule, no money, and a lot of work, but when I heard what it was all for, I immediately told him that I would be more than happy to come light the show. Both Susan and I have found it to be a great experience." What they didn't find was a great lighting system at the school. Goldman and Nicholson supplemented the existing lighting equipment and decided to steer clear of the house rigging system as well. "Not knowing their rigging system, unsure of the age of it and the usable load ratings we went with an almost entirely ground-supported system," explains Goldman.

As to the plot itself, he says "We brought in a lot of moving lights that are used for texture and color; we're lighting the acoustical cloud over the downstage thrust to bring that colorful sky out into the house. On the thrust, we're using Philips Color Kinetics ColorBlaze LED ground rows to blast color up onto the set and we're also using those units for the cyc lighting. The concept was to make it as fun and vibrant as possible."

In addition to 20 ETC Source Four ellipsoidals in the front of house lighting cove, Goldman and Nicholson placed a couple of Philips Vari-Lite VL3000 Wash units on trusses

placed out in the house as box boom positions for front washes and also had a pair of the units on either side of the stage apron for sidelight.

An unexpected surprise for Goldman was the enthusiasm of the young crew. "The students were great to work with and very ingenious," he states. "For example, when we discovered that the followspot operators'

movements were shaking the platform and causing the gobos to move all over the place, the kids went and found more scaffolding and erected a second tower for the moving lights that went around the spot positions so that it didn't touch the spot tower. Problem solved. Of course it was a lot of work but they just did it."

Having previously lit shows for the high school in Wilton, Conn., Nicholson knew that a student crew would work hard if you taught them how to do things. She was not disappointed. "The guys that we have on the crew are smart and they do the work you ask them to do. They soak up all the information; they're like sponges. They'll sit by us and watch what we are doing during programming and are learning really fast," Nicholson relates. "I trained one of the students during programming on the High End Road Hog console and he operated the show. It was great, we went to lunch one day and while Herrick and I were out they wanted lights onstage and he was able to bring them up after just sitting watching me work and asking some questions."

That was one of many rewarding moments the entire team will have to look back on from the production. "There are some very poignant moments in the show," says Goldman. "Like Horton's speck of dust. To everyone on this production it represents the Newtown community, and like Horton we want to protect it. Working on this project helps restore your faith in humanity. The 1214 Foundation's performing arts center will be a great way of looking forward. This show is a great way of starting to bring that about. There's a lot of joy in this show and has been during this whole experience." **SD**

"The stage is not merely the meeting place of all the arts, but is also the return of art to life."
-- Oscar Wilde

Sapsis Rigging is honored to support the 12.14 Foundation in its production of *Seussical*.

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