



A chance to shine: Actors with disabilities experience the joy, enrichment of theater



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Updated

2/19/2019 11:39 AM



Actors and actresses, including John Volk as Gaston, in red, middle, perform their parts during a dress rehearsal for Special Gifts Theatre's production of "Beauty and the Beast" in Libertyville. (Joe Lewnard | Staff Photographer)



Ally Paldmic plays the role of Belle during a dress rehearsal for Special Gifts Theatre's production of "Beauty and the Beast" in Libertyville.

(Joe Lewnard | Staff Photographer)



Ceasar Vela plays the Beast during a dress rehearsal for Special Gifts Theatre's production of "Beauty and the Beast" in Libertyville. Performances are Feb. 23-24 at Copeland Manor School. (Joe Lewnard | Staff Photographer)

John Volk of Libertyville excels in math and science at school, but these days he's channeling his goofier side in his role as Gaston, the over-the-top suitor in Disney's "Beauty and the Beast."

John is part of the first show produced in Libertyville by Special Gifts Theatre (<https://specialgiftstheatre.org/>). The Northbrook based organization already mounts more than 10 shows each year in Chicago, Palatine and Winnetka, and starting this month its leaders brought the concept to Lake County.

"Beauty and the Beast" takes place at 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, Feb. 23 and 24, at Copeland Manor School in Libertyville. Tickets are \$12 and are available at www.specialgiftstheatre.org (<http://www.specialgiftstheatre.org>).

"We just see tremendous amounts of growth in our actors," says Elise Larsen, executive director. "They come back year after year, more confident and outgoing, and loving the lasting friendships they make."

Occupational therapist Susie Fields started the organization back in 2000 after seeing how much her own children thrived in the performing arts. She envisioned a company where children and teens with special needs could experience the joy and enrichment of theater.

Using the stage as a platform, Special Gifts Theatre works to develop social skills as well as speech and language, focusing and attention skills, cooperation and self-confidence.

That seems to be the case with a pair of veteran performers, 20-year old Hope Michelotti of Libertyville and 24-year old Patrick Sanchez of Vernon Hills.

Both commuted for 10 years to Winnetka for the chance to perform on stage, before landing the opportunity right in their own backyard.

Michelotti plays the role of Maurice, Belle's father, in the show, while Sanchez gets to show his flair for comedy in the role of Lefou, Gaston's sidekick. Both had seen the movie of "Beauty and the Beast" and now jumped at the chance to be in it.

"I wanted to be in this play for so long," Michelotti says. "I love the acting -- and the singing. It makes me happy."

Sanchez agrees, adding that he loves the part of Lefou.

"He's funny, hilarious and really silly," he says. "Sometimes, we get so silly that I forget my lines."

That's where his peer mentor, 14-year old Paige Regan of Libertyville comes in. She appears on stage next to Sanchez, dressed as Lefou, and she gently guides him if he forgets a line.

The theater company is fairly unique in that way. Peer mentors meet their stage partners at the beginning of rehearsals, which in this case was back in October. They take the first two months to learn about the show and its characters, and each other.

"I didn't know what to expect when I got there on the first day," says Paige, an eighth-grader at Oak Grove School. "But it was so fun and everyone was smiling. Getting to know Patrick really helped. We had a bond going into rehearsals."

As a first timer on stage, John Volk leaned heavily on his peer mentor, 11-year old Nina Landvik of Libertyville.

"She really helps me," John says, "with putting on my costume and remembering my lines."

Speaking of costumes, that was one of the adjustments John had to make: getting used to wearing a pompadour wig in his role as Gaston.

"That's the only thing that makes me nervous," he says, "wearing the wig."

Overcoming all kinds of fears is part of the learning experience, Larsen says, while giving young actors a chance to shine.

"We look for ways to show off their strengths," Larsen says, "while challenging them to develop new skills."