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Creative adaptation is at the core of what we do!

Local KIDS with special needs performing against all odds in a pandemic!

By Debbie Taus-Barn

COVID-19 has impacted many industries, including theater artists. Dependent on physical interaction and packed audiences, Broadway, regional, and local theater stages remain dark throughout the pandemic. However, one local theater company's light continues to shine brightly for kids who have a variety of physical, cognitive, learning and social special needs... and their innovative approach is reaching new audiences.

Special Gifts Theatre's (SGT) mission revolves around the creative adaptation of theater arts to not only showcase individuals' talents on-stage but to also provide a safe and supportive environment that helps students gain confidence, improve self-worth, navigate tricky social situations and cope with challenges. "The Special Gifts Theatre team does a wonderful job with its participants, teaching them teamwork and theatre skills while providing social opportunities and fun for all," says Mary and John Breen parents of Sean who is playing two roles in the upcoming production of Wizard of Oz; the Mayor of Oz and Wally, a Witch's Guard.

Although practicing theatrical arts during a pandemic hasn't exactly been a picnic, students and families say it's a positive and helpful experience thanks to a dedicated SGT crew, virtual accommodations and an enthusiastic, "can-do," supportive attitude from the cast.

Special Gifts Theatre Executive Director, Elise Larsen, couldn't agree more. "Creative adaptation is at the core of what we do—even in a pandemic," says Larsen, who, along with the SGT staff, peer mentors and volunteers has creatively adapted rehearsals and

performances to showcase students' strengths for over 20 years.

Larsen acknowledges, however, that delivering a virtual, educational and theatrical experience under Covid constraints requires multiple layers of adjustment, not to mention a lot of improv, but, the show must go on! Larsen reports, "We're accustomed to revising scripts to accommodate verbal ability, adapting actors' entrances and exits according to mobility constraints, and creating costumes and props with a mindfulness toward individuals' needs and preferences. Accommodating the pandemic is just another layer of adaptation for our team to work through."

Much to students' and parents' delight, SGT rehearsal schedules stayed intact throughout the pandemic, which provided a sense of normalcy for students and at a time that was anything but normal. "It makes me so happy to hear Robyn laugh and sing with her friends as they rehearse each week," says Rhonda Gray of Glenview, whose daughter, Robyn plays Niece of the Lollipop Guild in SGT's upcoming production of Wizard of Oz.

Both Robyn and Sean are grateful that at SGT you are able to meet so many new friends and interact with each other in a variety of ways with the many modifications on how this is being done every step of the way. For example, cast announcements and costume hand-outs, formally ceremonial on-stage, photo opportunities, morphed into rolling, drive-by car parades. Scripts required further adaptations for on-screen (vs. on-stage) story telling. Dance numbers and scene work were rehearsed in Zoom break-out rooms instead of school performing arts theaters.



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(Pictures from left to right) Robyn Gray (Glenview) playing Winsor Lollipop Guild, Jenna Pomykalski (Glenview) playing Jasmine/Dance Captain of the Jitterbugs, Katie Livingston (Kenilworth) playing Dorothy, Rachel Palmer (Glenview) playing Savannah/Lullaby League, Sean Brown (Glenview) playing Wally/Witch's Guard & Marlow Mayor of Oz, Hope Michelski (Highland Park) playing Ginger/Lollipop Guild & Zoo Farmhand, Andrew Spitzer (Glenview) playing Dan/Doomer to Oz.

Outside of the virtual rehearsal room, filming with the constraint of Brady Bunch-style Zoom grids presented the opportunity to add variation to key scenes by editing in close-ups. And, since most students rehearsed in their living or bedrooms against varied backdrops, scenery needed to be communicated in post-production by overlaying frames that connote the setting.

The audience experience has been modified as well. "For the first time, our students are able to watch their on-screen debut at home with their families, so we adapted the audience experience as well to make it extra special for them," says SGT's Program Operations Director, Debbie Taus-Barth. Family and friends from around the country (and world) can now watch the performances. So far, SGT has sold tickets in over 27 states and 8 countries! Locally SGT is reaching new audiences too, the virtual format allows for local classrooms and community groups to take "virtual field trips" to watch the performances which would normally only be offered on weekends. The flexible adaptation continues the celebration of different abilities by encouraging conversations about acceptance and inclusion while engaging in performing arts enrichment for the local community.

In the end, the applause and standing ovations of a live performance will definitely be missed, but the impact may well be the same, if not greater. "I am very confident that this year's SGT's performances will be different, but I'm just as confident that the whole experience will still be extremely valuable," says Larsen. Students and parents agree.

During COVID, so much has changed for all of us. Jenna Pomykalski, who is playing Jasmine the dance captain of the Jitterbugs says, "SGT has a special place in my heart for giving all of us the opportunity to be together again on screen when I was feeling so alone and isolated!" Sue and Mike Pomykalski feel that, "Special Gifts Theatre has given Jenna the opportunity to express herself through music, dance, acting and being part of a group that works together through learning, cooperation and having a great time with her peers."

For more information about SGT programming, or to purchase tickets to the May 22-23 Creating Outside the Lines SGT's Adult Program production of Wizard of Oz, please visit www.specialgiftstheatre.org/tickets-for-upcoming-shows/. The virtual performance will be closed captioned.

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