

May 17, 2003

## MST Readies Premiere of New Children's Musical

by Linda Humphrey

When third-grader Carla Blumberg first appeared at the Main Street Theatre, in *Bye Bye Birdie*, she was thrilled, mostly because she got to eat cookies on stage. Four years of musicals later, she sang a solo as tough-girl Rizzo in *Grease*. "When I heard the applause, I broke out of character and smiled," she recalls. She decided right then to become an actress.

Now a graduate of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Theater Department, Blumberg has returned to the Main Street Theatre to assist director Nancy Howe on *Like Totally Grimm*, the new children's musical premiering May 30.



Composer Bob McDowell leads cast members in rehearsing the show's finale.

As Howe's first-ever assistant, she is getting a first chance at directing, coaching the eight-to twelve-year-olds with their lines and toying with the idea of someday running a place like the Main Street Theatre.

"Nancy has done an amazing job – I appreciate it now!" says Blumberg. "She knows how to talk to the kids. On bad days I'm amazed at the way she keeps her cool and gets the work

done. The kids don't stop talking! I'm trying to pay attention to how she directs people – what she looks for.”



Main Street Theatre director Nancy Howe in action.

For Howe, who runs the Main Street Theatre & Dance Alliance with her husband, Worth Howe, the rough part is casting. “The kids get their hearts set on a certain part,” she says. “It’s a terrible process for me, because I know the kids and worry about their feelings. I always want to quit at that time of year!”

All sixty-five acting students in third through seventh grade landed a role in Grimm. The kids auditioned for the parts they wanted – and most coveted the leads. “I tried to forewarn them – it’s seldom that a third grader will do a lead!” Howe says. “They also had to sing something. Some just sang *Happy Birthday*. I needed to hear if they could hold a tune.” The group broke into three casts; each will stage two performances.

Once through the dizzying 17 weeks of rehearsals – two hours every week – the kids feel that they’re a team. “That’s one thing about show business that people don’t know,” Howe says. “A little bonus. The kids come away feeling really good about themselves.”

Some have leapt to Broadway and television. Aliane Baquerot is currently on Broadway in *Movin’ Out*. Her credits include *Saturday Night Fever* on Broadway, and television shows *Saturday Night Live*, *Sesame Street*, and *One Life to Live*. Child-actor John Babcock landed a lead role on Broadway in *The Secret Garden*. Natalia Ortiz appeared on television’s *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. Neil Tandon is writing and directing plays at Cooper Union.

Still, few of the students are lured by show business. “It is a very difficult business to crack,” Howe warns. “It takes a lot of way off-Broadway shows or student or independent movies, lots of hard work and money spent on lessons and pictures, and sometimes – most of the time – success doesn’t come. I see a few younger kids coming up who will probably

try. Boys, especially, are usually discouraged from doing it.”



Like *Totally Grimm* playwrights Bill McMahon and Bob McDowell.

For many kids – would-be stars or not – a spell at the Theatre cures shyness. “It’s an opportunity for people who don’t express themselves easily in the world to express their feelings in a safe place, within the context of portraying a character,” Howe says. “It’s an amazing process to watch because their confidence accelerates once they experience being on stage.” Blumberg, in fact, says she was shy growing up and hadn’t wanted to play Rizzo in *Grease*. “I wanted to be Sandy, the shy, sweet girl! But I kept getting cast as Rizzo in different forms.”

For Blumberg, the Main Street Theatre brought Island-based friends as well, especially after she left for the United Nations International School and the neighborhood kids took off for other schools. After she left for college, she came back to act in some of the Theatre’s adult shows. “NYU hasn’t always been the most supportive place,” she says. “I come back here to get that great acting feeling, and I leave with a huge smile on my face.”

*Like Totally Grimm*, with music and lyrics by Bob McDowell and book by Bill McMahon, opens May 30 and runs through June 2. Tickets for regular seating are \$10, with matinee seating available at \$5 for children ten and under.

Three casts will each stage two performances. There are evening performances on Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday at 7:30 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2:00 p.m. Reservations and information: 1-212-371-4449.

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