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SECTION II

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2008

THEATER

Where Young People Run the Show

A little after 3 in the afternoon on a recent Thursday, a group of around two dozen teenagers formed a circle in the lobby of the New Victory Theater on 42nd Street. Although the New Victory is dedicated to children's and family programming, these particular youngsters weren't here to be entertained. They were here to work.

The New Victory was the first of the historic theaters to reopen in the 1990s as part of the cleanup and renewal of 42nd Street. Because it was small (500 seats) and didn't have much lobby or backstage space, New 42nd Street, the not-for-profit organization set up by the city and state to find new uses for the theaters, envisioned it as a theater for children, which would be supported in part by rents from the other theaters on the street.

In addition to offering affordable theater for families and school groups, the New Victory, from the beginning, has had an ambitious youth jobs program. There is an apprenticeship program, in which college and graduate students work in different departments of the organization. Moreover, the front-of-house operation is staffed almost entirely by 16-to-22-year-olds, who welcome audiences, sell refreshments, and try to keep the sometimes restive audiences in their seats during the performance.

The president of New 42nd Street, Cora Cahan, said that, before they opened the theater, she and her staff consulted with guidance counselors and social service organizations around the city about what they could do to help teenagers. "People said: 'They need jobs — they need pocket change,'" Ms. Cahan recalled.

The program started out without much structure. When he came on the job in December 1995, the New Victory's director of front-of-house operations, Jim Joseph, had only seven days to hire a staff before the theater opened. He was given a list of half a dozen names of teenagers, all of whom had participated in the 52nd Street Project — a program that matches professional theater artists with kids from Hell's Kitchen, and which was founded by Ms. Cahan's son-in-law, Willie Reale — and who were interested in ushering. He hired some work-study students from Marymount Manhattan College, where he had previously been an administrator in the drama department. And, through a connection at the Public Theater, he hired some young people who had worked as ushers there.

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The range of ages and experience levels among that first staff set the pattern for how the program would evolve. "The older ones had experience, and naturally they took the younger ushers under their wing," Mr. Joseph said. Eventually, "those older kids transitioned out, the younger kids got a little bit older, and then we started recruiting from high schools."

Before the New Victory opened, the staff consulted with guidance counselors and social service organizations around the city about what they could do to help teenagers.

Eventually, Mr. Joseph and the director of education, Edie Demas, decided to structure the usher corps as a three-year program, in which the older ushers would help manage and train the younger ones. "We felt like, at three years, they had had a lot of work experience; it was varied, and it progressed in terms of responsibility," Ms. Demas said. "After three years, it could become a crutch. It's a very familial place to be, and we really want to be developing these young people to succeed in whatever they want to do next."

At the meeting the other day, before the first performance of "Traces," a multi-genre circus and dance piece, for an audience of students and teachers, the front-of-house manager, Anthony Pound, talked to the ushers about the show. "Does anybody know how long it is?" he asked. "An hour?" volunteered one usher.

Mr. Pound shook his head. "Ninety minutes," suggested another. Mr. Pound nodded. "Jamil said it: 90

minutes." He noted some details that the ushers should be aware of. The performers would throw a basketball around, and there was always a chance it might roll off-stage. In that case, "Just clear it from the house," he instructed.

Mr. Joseph warned that the performance included a counterintuitive pre-show announcement. Instead of the usual recording telling people to turn off their cell phones and not to eat during the performance, the cast of "Traces" had made a recording encouraging the audience to talk on the phone and eat as much as they wanted. It was a joke, of course, but since this was the first performance, it wasn't clear how people would respond.

"The kids will probably get it," Mr. Joseph said with a twinkle in his eye. "The teachers we're not so sure of."

After giving themselves "snaps" for having run shows smoothly during the previous week, while Mr. Joseph had been away the group dispersed to assume their positions. A first-year usher, Jonathan

Bonilla, 17, explained why he loves the job.

"Everybody here is pretty much a family," he said. Because he wants to be an actor, he also enjoys the shows. "But you have to have that sense, you're also working," he added. "You're like, 'Oh, that's pretty cool what they did... Uh-oh, somebody's eating!'"

Jonathan definitely excepted, Mr. Joseph said that the ideal ushers are not usually the "theater kids" at their schools. Those kids are busy with rehearsals, so they don't have time for — or need — another universe outside of school.

"Those kids come here, and they're so focused on what's happening onstage that they're not getting a sense of the professional aspect of it," Mr. Joseph said. "The successful kids who come to us as ushers are the ones who are sort of lacking that touchstone in their lives. Every young person needs a group to belong to," he said. "And for a lot of them, this becomes that."

In addition to the professional training,

Mr. Joseph and Ms. Demas organize several workshops a year, on everything from résumé writing and interview techniques to legal rights.

"A good friend of mine is a lawyer for New York County Defenders," Mr. Joseph said. "He does a workshop that we subtitle: 'The rights you think you have that you don't, and the rights you don't think you have that you do.' Because the unfortunate reality with our young people is that they have interactions with the police, and sometimes they're unjustified. This gives them a knowledge base for how to handle the situations," he said. "It's one of our most successful workshops."

Mr. Joseph said he also tries to reinforce messages the children get at school about the importance of going to college. He reads a lot of application essays and often writes recommendation letters.

None of this is exactly what he was trained for, with his background as a radio broadcaster and a theater administrator. But working with teenagers clearly comes naturally to him. "I was hired to be the house manager," he said. "It was luck that I had the hidden skill set to run a youth development program."



TAKE YOUR SEATS Jessica Dutan, left, and Andy Valdez serve as ushers at the New Victory Theater.

HEUCHUL KIM