

THE YEAR AHEAD: CULTURE EVENTS, CHILDREN'S CLASSES, AND SUMMER CAMPS

# New York family

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## A Victory For Theater, For Family, And For the City

*With Its Ground-Breaking Approach To Children's Theater, The New Victory Has Helped To Revitalize Times Square While Expanding The Possibilities of Live Entertainment For Families*

BY SARAH SELTZER

Standing among the blinking lights, oversized billboards, and crowded shops around Times Square, the New Victory Theater looks much like its neighbors on the booming stretch of 42nd Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue. But its hordes of youthful patrons (and their parents and teachers) are the first clue that something very different and wonderful is happening here: a theater that combines the artistic dedication of the best of Broadway with an educational mission and a multicultural, multi-genre approach—all for the purpose of offering entertaining and provocative live performance for children. If you want classic kid-friendly Broadway, you can check out "The Little Mermaid" or "Shrek" or "Billy Elliot." If you want kid-friendly Broadway with an edge, however, you head to the New Victory, where you are as likely to discover the spellbinding imagery and gymnastics of a famed acrobatic troupe from Morocco (in "Taoub") as you are a hilarious tour of ancient Greece offered by two very talented actors in a whirlwind version of "Jason and the Argonauts."

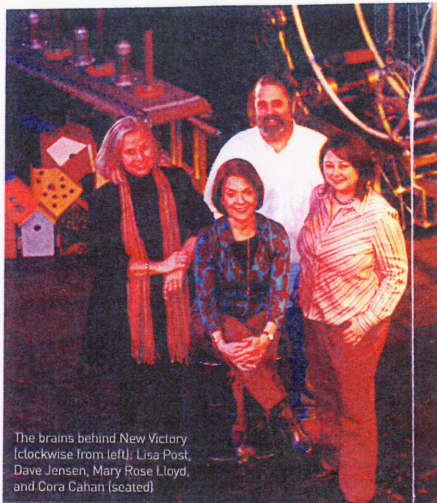
Its unique approach to children's programming (not to mention its typically below-market ticket prices) has made the New Victory one of the most popular venues for family entertainment in the city. It is also the engine that powered its special role as one of the early cultural pioneers that transformed 42nd Street from an infamously seedy stretch of porn houses into the friendly and colorful cavalcade of entertainment and humanity it is today.

"I was the first employee here," says Cora Cahan, president

of the New 42nd Street, the umbrella group that oversees the New Victory and neighboring theaters and studios on the block. "The street had 80-some-odd adult uses. The raw materials we had to work with were a group of theaters that were blighted, disused, and abused over the years."

The idea for New Victory's special mission and approach was generated by Cahan and the other original board members. "We wondered, 'What can we do that doesn't replicate another nonprofit and that adds to the cultural vibrancy of the city?'" she says. They decided on a theater for children and families, in part because they knew it would be a springboard for educational programs and other unique types of outreach to children around the city. When they did their research on children's theaters across the country and even around the world, they found that most had in-house performing companies. Cahan and her colleagues wanted to take a new approach.

"New York is not like anywhere else," says Cahan. "So we decided to make something up that has no model. We wanted to lasso good stuff that's appropriate for kids, whether it was actually intended for kids or not, and bring it all to 42nd Street. We wanted plays, music, opera, dance, new vaudevillians,



The brains behind New Victory (clockwise from left): Lisa Post, Dave Jensen, Mary Rose Lloyd, and Cora Cahan (seated)



Taoub

physical comedy, 21st century circuses—the whole gamut."

In December 1995, the New Victory opened as the first major restoration on 42nd Street. "It brought the street back to life," says Cahan. "It was so busy at the time it opened, but we never stopped to say, 'Oh, wow, we did it.' This was our first step." Fourteen years later, its programming is as cutting-edge as ever, and its outreach efforts are still expanding, both substantially subsidized by rent from the commercial tenants on the street as well as by corporate and government donors and lots of loyal family members.

One of the New Victory's core goals is to do what it can to foster a love of the arts in city kids. To that end, school groups from all over the city converge on the theater during the week, and the theater also sends teaching artists into hundreds of classrooms a year. When not performing for student groups, the theater opens up to NYC's families.



Jason and the Argonauts

The young people watching the plays aren't the only ones getting valuable experience from being there. The ushers and people selling (typically healthy) concessions come from the New Victory's employment program called "youth corps." Senior Vice President Lisa Post explains that the youth corps is a 3-year training program for high school and college students that is coordinated between the education department and front-of-house staff. The students are trained and work part-time, learning both about the theater and also about the working life.

"For most, it's the first time they've had an opportunity to work," says Post. "It gives them training for the future by giving them real responsibilities in customer service, merchandising, how to operate cash registers, concessions, and leadership skills."

The program also teaches these young people job skills like writing resumes, interviews, and how to open a bank account.

But perhaps the most fun is developing the ushers' critical eye. "When patrons talk to them, they can speak knowledgeably about theater and the work on stage," says Post.

But in order for all the educational and work programs, workshops, and teachable moments to be effective, the plays, dances, circuses, and other kinds of performances being presented have to speak to the audience. And to that, New Victory's staff puts a premium on shows that stretch the traditional boundaries of children's entertainment, incorporating new art forms and traditions, rather than, say, tepid versions of classic children's stories.

"We want an excellent piece of theater, not kiddie theater. The work has to be layered," says Mary Rose Lloyd, director of programming.

Lloyd has traveled around the world to find companies and shows that fit the bill, and then, together with Lisa Post and Dave Jensen, figures out how to create a menu of offerings within the theater's budget that allows for different genres of performances that appeal to different age levels, from tots to teens.

The great diversity that typifies a New Victory calendar was in full throttle last fall and early winter, as the theater played host to performers as varied as Cirque Mechanics, an avant-garde circus company that turned the theater into a "woeful widget factory," to Dan Zanes, the beloved Brooklyn-based rocker-turned-family folk singer, who hosted a holiday-themed show touching on multiple ethnic and cultural traditions.

In 2009, the season opens with "Cranked," a serious one-man show for adolescents that incorporates spoken word and pulsing hip-hop rhythms from a live DJ to dramatize the story of a troubled young man full of unrealized ambitions, and "Jason and the Argonauts," performed by a Scottish duo who use swashbuckling physical comedy—as well as toy action figures!—to retell the famous Greek myth.

Later in the season the New Victory will host "Taoub," an exotic show featuring French-Moroccan acrobats; a new production of "Henry V" from Minneapolis' famed Guthrie Theater and The Acting Company of New York; and Black Violin, a hip-hop violin concert.

As for what lies beyond the next season? "We just want to do more. We want to do more weeks of programming, make more work available to school kids, enhance in any way the experience of families," says Cahan. "The gestalt here is, What else can we do; how can we do it better? It keeps everybody a little bit charged." ☺

For more information about New Victory's shows and schedule, visit [newvictory.org](http://newvictory.org).

Andrew Scheraga