2020 VARIETY PERFORMING ARTS POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

Variety Vision Statement

"A world where children's abilities are redefined and possibilities are reimagined."

The shortened tagline is: "Abilities redefined…possibilities reimagined"

VARIETY THEATRE MISSION

Using performing arts platforms, provide children with special needs opportunities to perform in a professional musical theatre classic show in an inclusive Children's Ensemble expressly created to allow them, based on their ability through Ensemble or expanded roles, to demonstrate to themselves and the public at large their ability to participate in professional theatre produced and performed at the highest level allowing all who participate to reimagine both the individual and collective possibilities of this specifically American art form.

DESCRIPTION

Variety Theatre (VT) is the only project of its kind in the United States. Its award-winning approach to the importance of performing arts in the lives of children with disabilities is both innovative and impactful. The Variety Theatre is professional in every aspect of production: pre-production, auditions, casting, actors, directors, designers, musicians, production management and the venue. It is supported by the Variety Staff for its funding, marketing and communications, accounting, administrative support and child referrals.

VT provides opportunities for children on stage, backstage and in the audience. Although performing on stage is the obvious outcome of the process, VT offers equally beneficial opportunities for children who participate as interns mentored by the producer, director, musical director, the lighting, sound, scenic and costume designers along with the stage managers. Interns are age 13 to 20.

Students from the entire St. Louis Metropolitan Region are invited and encouraged to become part of the audience and ultimately the education that comes with this unique foray of diversity and inclusivity.

GOALS

Variety Theatre offers an opportunity for children with disabilities to be part of a professional production – as part of a TEAM (Ensemble) and based on their ability, perform in expanded roles. Working and cooperating with others, they bring a story to life and advance the message in a special way – their own way. The skills attained and the confidence that comes with audience approval is the ultimate output for the Variety child. It lifts their spirits, becomes part of their persona and transfers to other parts of their lives.

Variety Theatre's goals are tied to its mission which are related to theatre arts as the vehicle for attaining them:

- Provide an opportunity for children with special needs to:

    - Express themselves by developing skills in acting, dancing and singing in a musical theater production
    - Form friendships with other children who share an interest in theatre and diversity
    - Be challenged with the work (often adapted) associated with productions and the opportunity to gain self-esteem in their accomplishments
    - Become more independent by assuming their individual responsibilities to the Children's Ensemble.
    - Participate in a professional theatre experience at the highest level of the child's abilities
- Provide an opportunity for teens with special needs to express themselves in the backstage theatre crafts vital to every successful show by interning with the designers and directors of the show
- Surround children with special needs with designers, directors, and assistants who are dedicated to the mission of Variety Theatre
- Facilitate interaction between children with special needs and their age-level peers through joint participation in an ensemble platform of teamwork and acceptance
- Facilitate an appreciation of the abilities of the children with special needs with the cast, the crew and the public that attends the productions
- Identify the impact of Variety Theatre on the communication skills, socialization, self-esteem and independence of children with special needs
- Facilitate the interaction and collaborative opportunities among other educational, medical, developmental and theater professionals of the community to support children with special needs
- Strive to develop the skills of children with special needs in order to be considered for parts in the ensemble as well as featured ensemble roles, designated character roles within the ensemble, principal supporting character roles, and principal roles

THE FORMULA of the BROADWAY MUSICAL TRADITION

The Broadway musical is one of the two art forms born right here in the U.S.A., the other being jazz (music and dance). There is a long tradition based in a very specific formula for writing, composing, casting, and producing these great American musical theatre pieces.

Variety Theatre is considered to be one of the most innovative and forward-thinking professional theatres in the St. Louis area. Each one of the VT production team of artists has acquired many years of training and experience in the aforementioned formula of musical theatre. One of the key pieces of this formula, and, quite possibly *the most crucial* piece of the puzzle, is casting. The Variety Theatre is the only theatre of its kind in the world today because the work of these professional artists which is based in the true tradition of the American Broadway musical presented and produced here under the umbrella of Variety the Children's Charity of St. Louis. Because of the wondrous added component of the Variety kids and teens, this inclusive professional theatrical endeavor takes more time and more delicate care to choose, produce, design, and cast the Variety Theatre shows than anyone can possibly imagine. Variety Theatre uses this traditional formula in casting their shows. In order to understand this formula better, here is a snapshot of what the Variety Theatre producer, director/choreographer, and musical director look for when selecting and casting the Variety Theatre shows:

SHOW SELECTION

Show selection is based on the following criteria: The show must be one that children want to be in, one that children want to go see, one that will maximize children's performance opportunities throughout the show, and one that has a life enhancing message.

Long before auditions, callbacks, and casting occur, the Variety Theatre team's process is as follows:

- Once the producer has hired the director, choreographer, musical director, and the major design team members (sets, costumes, lighting, stage management, sound, and props), the show selection process begins with many weeks of discussions on which show to choose for the following season. This decision is made by the producer with input from the director/choreographer and the musical director along with various VT design team members.
- Once the show is chosen, the producer secures the rights to the show and begins to work diligently along with the designers to ensure that the show can:
    - Provide a safe environment
    - Fit into the Touhill Theatre
    - Create the proper, magical environment for the Variety Theatre's specific aesthetic for story-telling with the addition of children of all abilities

For many of the children Variety Theatre is a year-round endeavor fully saturating them with its annual production and all the parts and pieces that abound in a professional production. Throughout the process they grow and learn from:

- auditions
- training, and preparation
- rehearsals
- performances

Everyone in the cast receives a contract signed by the producer. If the person cast accepts the role, he/she must sign the contract and return to Variety.

AUDTIONS, CALLBACKS, and CASTING

When casting the Variety Theatre production, the producer, director/choreographer, and musical director are specifically looking to build the entire production around the Variety kids and teens by following the guidelines set forth in the Variety Vision Statement: *"A world where children's abilities are redefined and possibilities reimagined."* With the exception of a very few shows ("Annie", "Oliver!", and "Peter Pan" to name a few), the Broadway musicals chosen for Variety Theatre are not written to have kids and teens featured as part of the ensemble. However, thanks to the support of the Actor's Equity Association along with the organizations who carry the rights to these shows (as in our partnership with Disney Theatricals), Variety Theatre is already *reimagining* what's possible by creating a place where the Variety kids and teens can *redefine their abilities.* The Variety Theatre company was set up so that the Variety kids and teens could be in the Children's Ensemble of a professional show to experience the inclusive nature of the theatre community. Over the years, however, the Variety Theatre has found a place for the Variety kids and teens in not only the *ensemble,* but also as *featured ensemble, designated character/roles,* and both *principal and supporting roles*. (Note: all of the part types are defined below) Our commitment is to continue to look for ways to *redefine and develop the*

talents of our Variety kids and teens by *reimagining the possibilities* of each show that we present.

ENSEMBLE

When casting a professional show that is a "Broadway musical" it all starts with the foundation: *The Ensemble, o*r, as it is sometimes called "the singing and dancing chorus". The requirements for the Ensemble are:

- Must be a positive person who can take direction and learn music and choreography quickly
- Must have a certain quality of voice that will suit the specific needs of the show. (Note: sometimes the person auditioning may not have the vocal talent that "meets the needs of the show", however, their dancing skills may be acceptable. In this case, the producer and the director/choreographer will meet with the musical director to decide how said talent can fit into the Ensemble casting)
- Must be able to move/dance in a way that will suit the specific needs of the show. (Note: sometimes the person auditioning may not have the movement/dance abilities that "meet the needs of the show", however, their vocal skills may be acceptable. In this case, the musical director will meet with the producer and director/choreographer to decide how said talent can fit into the Ensemble casting)

FEATURED ENSEMBLE

In addition to singing, dancing, acting within the group numbers as part of the Ensemble, the *Featured Ensemble* actor/singer/dancer might possibly be featured by the director/choreographer and/or musical director with one or all of the following (see some examples of Variety kids in italics):

- A solo speaking or singing line as part of the ensemble.
  Libby Schueddig as Lucy Harper in "Tom Sawyer – The Musical""
  Jacob Reuther as Lyle Peters in "Tom Sawyer – The Musical"
  Skily Smith as Susie Rogers in "Tom Sawyer - The Musical"
  Julian Johnson and Paul Marler as Fagin's Boys in "Oliver!"
  Libby Schueddig, Kaitlyn Trower, and Caleb Wells as Lost Boys in "Peter Pan"

- Featured staging or choreography of one or more of the big production numbers.
  Gracie Gibson as the Flying Monkey in "The Wizard of Oz"
  Andrew Adolphson as the Tap Dancing Chimney Sweep in "Mary Poppins"
  Phoebe McFarland, Gracie Kelley, and Olivia Kallous as the Flying Kites in "Mary Poppins"
  Meghan Concagh, Mollie Carter, Selah Harris, and Autumn Sprous in "Supercal" feature in "Mary Poppins" 2015
  All Teen Girls in "She's in Love" in "The Little Mermaid"

DESIGNATED CHARACTER/ROLE (within the Ensemble)

In addition to singing, dancing, acting within the group numbers as part of the Ensemble, the *Designated Character/Role* is a character/role that is written into the libretto (the script) and the music (the score). It's a "featured part" but not a principal or secondary role in the musical. These are small roles that possibly have between one and ten lines in the script, and possibly a solo line within one or more of the big ensemble production numbers. The child's contract will read "Ensemble" with the character/role added. This addition to the contract is called a "rider".

- *Kaci Conley* as Duffy in "Annie"
- *Lily Manning* as Shelley in "Annie"
- *Selah Harris* as Jane in "Peter Pan"

PRINCIPAL SUPPORTING CHARACTER/ROLE

The Principal Supporting role (or secondary lead) character/role is one of the main roles in the show. Typically, these lead characters are very often the comic relief in the show whose story line usually supports the plot of the main leading characters. Supporting characters usually have one or more songs that require solo, duet, trio, or even quartet/quintet singing and musicality skills. Additionally, their acting skills must be at highest level. Also, more often than not, the secondary characters must be able to adaptively dance or move extremely well holding center stage as a solo/lead performer.

- *Nick George* as Flounder in "The Little Mermaid"

PRINCIPAL ROLE

The Principals are the "leads" and are integral to telling the story. In a musical, the principals must not only have the best voices on the stage but must also be the best actors. Additionally, in a musical where the dancing takes center stage, the principals, very often, must also be able to demonstrate the necessary level of movement/dance ability.

- Examples of child principals are Gabe Cytron as Michael and Taylor Gilbert as Jane in "Mary Poppins" 2019; Phoenix Lawson and Fionna Scott as Michael and Jane in "Mary Poppins" 2015

Auditions are approached as a learning experience for the children as well as the opportunity for the producer and directors to choose children who will benefit the most from the production. The children selected will demonstrate that they can take direction and participate in the audition. The audition is comprised of singing (matching pitch), dancing (each child's demonstration of rhythm, body awareness, and movement), and acting (personality – ability to communicate in a variety of ways). The number of children cast and the ages of the children selected is dictated by the show which is selected by the producer. Because of the benefits inherent in programs that are inclusive, Variety theatre selects some children without disabilities to join the Children's Ensemble. These children are theatrically trained and ready to team up with the Variety kids and share their expertise and help when needed. The number of inclusive children chosen will not be higher than the number of Variety children chosen. After the preliminary audition, some children will receive a callback during which the children audition in a smaller group. This allows the adjudicators the opportunity to have additional time with the children to ensure a good fit and make the final decision. There are no entitlements from year

to year (participation one year does not mean a child is automatically selected for the next year). All principal parts for adults and children are cast at the discretion of the producer and director. The Production Director will inform Variety parents whose child is not selected as to the reasons why their child was not selected.

The Production Director will conduct a pre-audition informational meeting with parents who want to know more about the audition process, ask questions, or express concerns.

A Theatrical Child Assistant Team (TCAT) will manage all children's activities during auditions, training and preparations, rehearsals and performances. The TCAT will be comprised of individuals having backgrounds that will include any combination of educational and theatrical experience. The TCAT director will preferably have professional theater and special education background, manage the team efforts and report to the Executive Producer.

TRAINING AND PREPARATION

Variety's CURTAIN UP! Summer Theatrical Camp is the five-day preparation for rehearsals which allows the children to bond as an ensemble, study all the facets of the upcoming production's story, and begin expressing themselves in the context of the script, music, and choreography.

REHEARSALS

Rehearsals begin assembling all the parts of the musical with everyone involved in the cast: Principals, Chorus, and Children's Ensemble. The scope of this is profound with over 60 cast members pulling in one direction. The children experience the progression from rehearsal studio to the performance venue, the orchestra rehearsal and the final technical/dress rehearsals.

PERFORMANCES

The product of what the children have learned will be realized through their performances, ultimately bringing forth what they want to share with the audience and benefitting from the vast friendships and relationships they have forged over the span of four months. They always have a right to be proud of this achievement.

OUTCOMES

Over the years Variety Theatre has become part of the artistic fabric of the Greater St. Louis Region not only because of its artistic excellence and awards, but for its ability to make people look at the world in a different way. And that's the ultimate vision of Variety and hope for the future of mankind with regard to abilities.

THE MAGIC

The magic of Variety Theatre is NOT only the standing ovation at the end. It's the remarkable journey that marries a team of consummate musical theater professionals with a team of dedicated program professionals to form a company that never fails to achieve beyond all expectations.

VARIETY CHILDREN'S CHORUS

Established in year 2000, Variety Children's Chorus (VCC) is inclusive and offers children of all abilities an opportunity to rehearse and perform throughout the school year serving as ambassadors of Variety's mission.

The Variety Kids Chorus is comprised of children from ages 10 to 13 and the Variety Teens Chorus is comprised of teens ages 14 to 21. Both groups build upon their vocal skills and experience the opportunity to perform for the public, thus enhancing their self-esteem and gaining the independence we value as life changing.

The VCC performs in its annual Holiday Concert in December and in the *Dinner With the Stars* gala in the spring. Other engagements are periodically scheduled as well.

Auditions are held annually. The minimum standards required for membership in the VCC involve taking direction, actively participating, and matching pitch and rhythm. A pre-audition meeting will be held to describe the audition process and answer any questions parents may have.

The team work necessary to bond, blend, and project a unified performance builds the perseverance and respect for one another that leads to long lasting socialization outcomes.

The VCC is inclusive and diverse, a glowing example of acceptability among its members as a model for our community to emulate.

Everybody Sings, a new addition to the VCC program is dedicated to giving children the opportunity to sing in a group just for the pleasure and love of singing. Members of this group will have the opportunity to build a foundation of music appreciation and elementary skills without any minimum standards. Children ages 10 to 21 will be encouraged to join this program. Based the ability of the child to reach the minimum standards and the director's recommendation, children may be able to advance to VCC. Every nine weeks they will have the opportunity to perform for their family and friends.

VARIETY DANCE

Variety Dance is an inclusive program established to give Variety children the opportunity to develop the skills necessary to perform in a musical theatre production. The classes are comprised of students of all abilities. There is no audition, but a placement class is held at the beginning of the school year or whenever a new student begins the program to ensure that the child is placed in the appropriate class.

The syllabus will include steps and combinations typically choreographed for musicals. Accompaniment will be live piano with music from classic Broadway musical scores.

The class will have typical dance class decorum: no talking, proper dress, and dance shoes.

The syllabus will include warm-ups, body awareness, space awareness, age appropriate movements and attention to rhythms. Artistic expression will be encouraged throughout the class.

Students will receive personal attention from the instructors along with positive reinforcement during the class.