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'Mermaid' swims up the river

Student actors debut 'Jr.' version of Disney favorite in Tarrytown

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She may be half fish, but Ariel, Disney's little mermaid, has had nearly as many lives as a cat.

She was the focus of a 1989 feature film, a TV series, a 2008 Broadway musical, and enough merchandising to make Miley Cyrus blush.

The story of the mermaid who dreams to be part of the human world takes another big step Friday in Tarrytown when Random Farms Kids' Theater presents "The Little Mermaid JR," the musical distilled from Broadway's 2 hours and 40 minutes to something closer to 75 minutes.

Producer Anya Wallach, director Alexis Grausz and their team have shepherded more than 120 student actors — age 8 to 18 — through a whirlwind three-week process involving four separate casts.

It will be the "junior" musical's first fully mounted production: eight performances this weekend and next at the Tarrytown Music Hall.

The goal is to help Disney refine the script by showing them how it looks in production.

Steve Fickinger, Disney Theatrical's vice president for creative development and theatrical licensing, says Wallach's team was a good fit.

"Random Farms has a great reputation for developing young performers and their love of theater, which coincides with Disney Theatrical's mission to inspire the next generation of theatergoers and theatermakers," he says. "Since we're still refining this middle-school version of our Broadway show, Random Farms' proximity and production expertise are added benefits."

The show is cinematic, Wallach says, but much is left open to artistic interpretation.

"The script says 'Ariel lifts her skirt and her fins turn into legs,'" she says. "As a children's theater

'MERMAID': A junior version swims onstage

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producer with a limited budget and two weeks of rehearsal, you look at that and go 'Oh, my gosh! How do you make that happen?' But it really forces you to be creative and to think out of the box.

"Now we can look back at all of the cool things we came up with," Wallach says.

The characters will all be there: Ariel, the headstrong daughter of King Triton who wishes to walk among the humans; her sisters; her crustacean guardian, Sebastian; Flounder, her fishy friend; and Ursula, the sea witch. There's also the handsome Prince Eric, who is captivated by Ariel's voice.

The songs — by Howard Ashman, Glenn Slater and Westchester's Alan Menken — are still there, too, including "Under the Sea," "Kiss the Girl" and "Part of Your World."

On Broadway, director Francesca Zambello put the



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Director/Producer Anya Wallach, right, of "Disney's The Little Mermaid JR" works with Hadley Durkee, who is one of four actresses who play Ariel in the Random Farms' production.

cast on wheeled shoes that allowed actors to glide across the stage.

Choreographer Kristin Madden of Tarrytown says she would have embraced the wheeled shoes if she had had more time. But a three-week schedule precluded that.

She says she needed to employ a "vocabulary of movement that speaks to them be-

ing undersea creatures."

There was a learning curve, Madden says, noting that she couldn't have Ariel's sisters bend down because their costumes included tails that didn't allow for knees to bend.

One of the production's four Ariels is Rye's Hadley Durkee, 12, a seventh-grader at Rye Middle School.

"I love playing her, and be-



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ing one of the first people to play her, because there are so many different sides to her," Durkee says.

Noah Ruff, 14, of Croton-on-Hudson, plays the stern King Triton in Cast A and Cast B and the put-upon crustacean Sebastian in Cast C.

He says he loves playing the crab because "I like fun, crazy parts and it's such an iconic role. And I get to sing 'Kiss the Girl,' a great song."

The cast hails from across the Lower Hudson Valley and beyond: Katonah to Allendale, N.J., New Paltz to Rye.

The work they've done will help untold Ariels, Tritons and Sebastians to play these parts in elementary and middle schools around the world in years to come.

But they'll know that this particular mermaid got on her feet right here in Westchester.

SEE 'MERMAID,' 4B