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# Random Farms theater helps local kids achieve Broadway dream

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By JANINE BOWEN SPECIAL TO NEWSDAY



Photo credit: Elizabeth Daza | "[Being] in front of an audience feels really good," said Zach of his experience in "Chaplin" on Broadway. "To have people [applaud] for you the first time feels really great."

## Videos



Local kids prepare for Broadway at Random Farms theater

## Galleries



Random Farms Kids' Theater in Elmsford

The small dressing room in Manhattan's Barrymore Theatre is decorated like a typical young boy's bedroom: There's an Xbox, a Peyton Manning figurine and a Jets flag hanging from a window. But amid those items are others that tell a different story. There are costumes and mannequins, and sitting next to the Manning figurine, a puppet of Charlie Chaplin. For the time being, the room belongs to Zachary Unger, a sweet, shy, 9-year-old from Westchester County who is currently originating the role of young Chaplin in "Chaplin," his Broadway debut.

"[Being] in front of an audience feels really good," Zach said of his experience in the musical. "To have people [applaud] for you the first time feels really great."

Performing since the age of 5, Zach is no newbie to the stage. He received his training, as did several other young stars in Broadway productions, at the Random Farms Kids' Theater in Elmsford. Started by Anya Wallach in her parents' Chappaqua basement in 1995, Random Farms has become an almost direct route to Broadway for many young actors. To date, more than 50 children who studied at Random Farms have appeared in Broadway shows.

In its infancy, the theater was a summer program made up of 13 neighborhood children who were recruited through invitations placed in mailboxes by Wallach, then 16, and her sister, Susan. Their first production, directed and produced by Wallach herself, was a "Broadway Musical Revue," with backing tracks supplied by a karaoke machine and a cassette tape. Wallach picked up running

the theater each summer, and after graduating from [New York University](#) with a degree in music education, opened the theater full time. Today, Random Farms offers dozens of programs that serve thousands of local children each year. The company even serves as the resident children's theater at the historic Tarrytown Music Hall.

"If I had one word to describe the evolution, I would say organic," Wallach said. "It wasn't like I set out to open a huge company one day."

## THE DESIRE TO REMAIN LOCAL

Since its humble beginnings, Random Farms has grown into a respected institution. But despite all of the success, Wallach is determined to keep the theater local.

"We have built up a following here, and I would hate to abandon the people who helped make it what it is," she said. "I feel like we are close enough to Manhattan that if you live there you can still participate, but I think if we moved we would lose a lot of our suburban kids."

Indeed, Random Farms students come not only from Westchester County but also from [New Jersey](#), [Connecticut](#) and, in the case of one student, [Delaware](#). The suburban location allows the nonprofit organization to keep programs affordable for most families, ensuring that children of all income levels have the opportunity to follow their dreams.

Of course, the students don't need to have dreams of being a Broadway star before signing up for one of Random Farms' many productions or workshops. Some of the greatest success stories have come from children who just needed an activity to fill their free time. Zach Unger, for instance, got into acting simply because he didn't want his mother to sign him up for the soccer team.

"I will always remember Zach Unger playing Johnny Casino in 'Grease,' " Wallach said. "He had so much stage presence and so much charisma even though he had never been on a stage and he was 5 years old. And I think we knew right then that there was something special and he was going places."

## A TALENTED STUDENT BODY

Zach isn't the only Random Farms student on his way to the top, nor is he the only member of his family to graduate from Random Farms to Broadway. Zach's younger brother, Noah, similarly began at Random Farms when he was 5. Recently, the 7-year-old was cast in his first Broadway role -- he'll star alongside Scarlett Johansson as Buster in the revival of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," which begins previews at the Richard Rodgers Theatre on Dec. 18.

Another former Random Farms student making her Broadway debut this season is Emily Rosenfeld, an 8-year-old from Scarsdale who plays the youngest orphan, Molly, in "Annie." Like Zach and his brother, Emily started at Random Farms when she was only 5, participating in their Jellybean program in a production of "Peter Pan." Unlike Zach, she always has dreamed of performing on Broadway.

"I think I was 5 years old, and I was very little at that time, and I wanted to be an actress for a very long time, since I was 4," she said. "Random Farms was near to our house, and it was a lot of fun."

Before being cast as Molly, Emily took part in Random Farms' "Annie" boot camp to help prepare her for the audition. Emily's mother, Rachel Rosenfeld, credits not only the boot camp but also Random Farms' specific blend of fun and professionalism with preparing her daughter for a Broadway career.

"It's just a really warm, nurturing environment but at the same time it's professionally run," Rosenfeld said. "That combination, I think, really helped cultivate this enjoyment in her."

Carly Paige Baron, a 12-year-old from New City, is also appearing on Broadway as Jane Banks in select performances of "Mary Poppins," a show that has featured more than 20 Random Farms alums to date. Carly performed in several Random Farms productions and met her agent through their showcase, an event put on each year in Manhattan with the goal of introducing the most marketable children to casting directors and agents. Carly's mother, Bonnie Baron, spoke of how Random Farms and the showcase helped pave her daughter's way to Broadway.

"I think that it gave her the opportunity to find an agent," she said, noting that she knew little about the business. "I wouldn't even know where to start to look for an agent or a manager without going that route."

## THE SECRET TO RANDOM FARMS' SUCCESS

So what has made Random Farms -- and the students who attend its programs -- so successful? Anya Wallach believes that two things contribute: the fact that Random Farms allows children to take lessons or appear in productions in between professional gigs and the way in which the program connects talented young actors with professionals.

"We want to make the complex world of pursuing professional theater as a child as streamlined and friendly as possible," she said.

Tony Terraciano, a Pelham native who has had a recurring role on the CBS show "Blue Bloods" since 2010, is a good example of Wallach's first point. The 12-year-old returned to act in a Random Farms production of "Cinderella" during the summer of 2011. Similarly, Carly Paige Baron also appeared in a Random Farms production in between Off-Broadway roles.

"When she does have a break, [Carly] will definitely go back," said her mom, Bonnie Baron. "You can't work professionally all the time. ... [Random Farms] gives them a place where they can go and still enjoy themselves and be in a show."

And whether they're professional actors or not, all of the students need time to just be kids, too, to indulge in other passions and dream other dreams.

Although Carly and Emily seem destined to continue on in showbiz, Zach, who joined Random Farms to avoid soccer, now sees his future as not an actor, but as an NFL star.

"I think acting is really fun," he said as his mother tossed him a football in his "Chaplin" dressing room, "but when I grow up I want to be ... a quarterback."

*Random Farms Kids' Theater is located at 77 Executive Blvd. in Elmsford. For more information, call 914-740-1010 or visit [www.randomfarms.com](http://www.randomfarms.com).*