

A Stage for Children, Created by a Student



By LYNNE AMES

WHEN Anya Wallach was 16, she mounted the first production of her children's theater company, which she had just founded. The musical revue was held in the clubhouse at Random Farms, a housing association in Chappaqua. She made the stage curtain from bed sheets — "pink, the closest I could get to red," she recalled.

That was four years ago. Ms. Wallach, a junior at the School of Education of New York University and music education major, still runs the Random Farms Kids Theater. This summer, the production was "Oliver!" which, with a cast of 50, was her largest yet. It was produced at the North Castle Library Theater and featured two girls, Serena Pomerantz, 10, and Alexandra Jumper, 9, alternating in the title role.

"I don't believe in typecasting," Ms. Wallach said when asked why the girls were playing a boy's part. "They were the most talented, so I cast them." (She added that the character of Oliver is young enough and dresses in such a way that the boy-girl difference is negligible.)

Ms. Wallach said she tries to make things as enjoyable and efficient as possible for the children in Random Farms Kids. She has negative memories of a high school production of "Pippin," when, as a chorus member, she felt largely ignored. She recalls being asked to show up for

rehearsals long before she was required to be on stage. "I would just sit around, bored. At Random Farms, I plan out every rehearsal schedule. I make sure everyone who is there is busy, doing something. And I never slight a child because he or she is a chorus member. Every individual gets some little bit, some special something to do."

The seeds for starting a theater company were sown early in Ms. Wallach as she grew up in Chappaqua. She said she was already "something of a ham" and also an entrepreneur when she was a child. When she was 10, for example, she started a stationery business: she bought plain paper and a few decorative rubber stamps and, voila! — she put designs on the paper and sold it at school for a profit.

As for performing, her first opportunity came when she was 10. Her mother, Jennifer Kay, a psychoanalyst, and her father, Stacy Wallach, a lawyer and a commercial real estate executive, knew someone connected to Nickelodeon, which produces children's shows on cable television. Young Anya got to appear on a debate show. "I was thrilled," she said. "I liked being backstage, hanging out with actors, directors and producers. It was the beginning."

"From then on, I begged my parents to let me audition for local productions." At 12, she was cast in "Annie," produced by Westco, a children's theater group in White Plains. Later she performed in shows at the Westchester Broadway Theater in



Children perform in "Oliver!" at North Castle Library Theater, above and upper left. Anya Wallach, who founded Random Farms Kids Theater with cast members.

Elmsford. She also acted in the Pleasantville Music Theater, the Yorktown Regional Theater and others, in musicals like "Brigadoon" and — twice, in different roles — "Fiddler on the Roof."

At 16, she worked with theater professionals in Manhattan, who found her jobs and began taking singing and dancing lessons. Her schooling, however, was not as valuable as "watching my peers, looking at them on stage, learning to understand subtle, indescribable things about stage presence." She started Random Farms Kids at the same age. "Since I was small, I had had it in the back of my mind to start a theater company for kids," she recalled. "That summer, I was 16. I was like, I'm going to try to do this thing. I was ready to create it. I wanted to give children a needed creative outlet locally."



Photographs by James Estrin/The New York Times

She typed out a letter and, with the help of her sister, Susan, put it in every mailbox in Random Farms. In it, she described what she was doing and asked anyone interested to return a form to her. "I said to myself, if I get 10 responses, I'll do it." Thirteen children, ages 8 through 12,

showed up for an audition in her basement. The revue was produced in the clubhouse before an audience of 60 seated on rented chairs.

The next year, she produced and directed "Annie." Then came "The Wizard of Oz" at the Chappaqua Library Theater, "Pete's Dragon" at

the North Castle Library Theater and finally, "Oliver!"

As the plays get bigger, so does the complexity of the production process. Rehearsals are three weeks, four hours a day, with children showing up in shifts. Ms. Wallach's budget this year was \$10,000, including assistant director, set designer, publicity, rights to the show and costumes. There was no orchestra; children sing to karaoke-type taped arrangements, although there is a rehearsal pianist.

To cover costs of the nonprofit operation, she charges a fee to each child who makes it through auditions and into the play. This year it was \$125. She also raises funds. Additionally, this year she held a workshop in Manhattan, where, for various fees, children got to perform in front of talent agents and casting directors.

She said she hopes to expand Random Farms Kids Theater in Westchester and eventually put on productions Off Broadway at the same time. She wants to continue directing, producing, teaching and acting. "I love the creative end of theater, the education part and the business end. I love it all," she said.