



Raise the Curtain

BY JILL JOHNSON

HATS OFF TO THE EXTRAORDINARY **STAPLES PLAYERS** THEATER PROGRAM

An hour north of the Great White Way on a less glitzy street called North Avenue lies a stage. It's in a high school, but don't let that detail fool you. On this expansive stage, in an auditorium that seats 900, the Staples Players transport audiences. After each show, people pouring out into the parking lot practically rub their eyes, expecting to find themselves in Times Square.

The talent is astounding. Just Google "Dance Ten Looks Three, Staples Players, A Chorus Line" and watch Amanda Horowitz (class of '14) drop jaws every juicy bit as effectively as Broadway's Audrey Landers. Listen to Alisan Porter's winning rendition of "Somewhere" on *The Voice*. This is the level of talent we are talking about. This stage in our small town is a springboard to Broadway, not to mention TV, film, composing, directing, singing, top college programs, and as one alum recounts, even Goldman Sachs.

Jim Farnen, assistant principal, has been at Staples for seventeen years and sees all the shows. "For anyone who hasn't been to a Staples Players show...it's the closest thing you're going to get to Broadway," he says. That caliber comes from both talent and the type of town we live in. "The Westport community supports the arts," he emphasizes. "For as long as I've been there, Staples has really supported the three As—academics, athletics and the arts."

THE START OF SOMETHING

The investment in a top theater program began over a half a century ago. In 1957 a young English teacher named Craig Matheson came to Staples. He had a master's in theater and the high school was looking for someone to start a thespian group. One particular kid, who wasn't much for going to class, proved an eager actor and early partner in brainstorming. "He was enormously talented," recounted Matheson in a 2009 *Inklings* interview. His name was Christopher Lloyd (Jim Ignatowski in the TV series *Taxi* and the zany professor in the *Back to the Future* trilogy).

From that auspicious beginning grew a program that would draw thousands of attendees to *War and Pieces*, a student-written anti-war production in the late sixties, which won the Moss Hart Award. The United Nations selected a photo essay of the show as part of a cultural exchange with the Soviet Union.

The Players became like an acting conservatory, funneling talent into the professional market. Matheson recounted that in one evening watching TV, he and his wife once spotted seven Players alumni.

In 1968, when Matheson took a position as vice principal, the superintendent encouraged him to find the best possible candidate to succeed him. For the next twenty-eight years, Al Pia headed up an ever

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—DAVID ROTH

more legendary Staples Players. Judy Luster ran the program from 1996 to 2000, the year that the Players were honored to perform at the Fringe Festival in Scotland.

ROTH & LONG

David Roth ('84), who has a BFA in acting, was an actor and founding member of several theater companies when he began substitute teaching at Bedford Middle School. He found himself drawn to education and took a position running the drama program there in 1992. Roth was no stranger to the stage nearby at Staples. As a Player, he participated in numerous shows, including playing the emcee in *Cabaret* and both acting and serving as stage manager in *Carousel*.

In 2000 Roth was thrilled to be named director of the Players. Kerry Long ('97) joined him in 2002, bringing with her stage management and directing experience from the end of Al Pia's era and college. "Kerry is codirector for the majority of the shows," says Roth.

The pair is married to their job—and, as of 2006, to each other. "Any dinner table conversation without talking about a show or one of the students would be rare," comments Kerry. "We're lucky we love what we do!" As their daughter (Lucy, age six) grows, so does the Players program.

"The Black Box Theatre was built in about 2004," says Roth. "That was a huge change. We do a drama or comedy every year, which enables us to teach the kids that small theater can be as professional and fulfilling as these big shows. We're both extremely proud of the Black Box productions we have done."

"The directing program is another new addition," adds Long. "We've had quite a few students go into directing, including Scott Weinstein, who recently won a Jeff Award in Chicago, and Gina Rattan, associate director of *Matilda* and *Billy Elliot* on Broadway and NBC's *Peter Pan Live* and *Sound of Music Live*. "We also have more parent mentoring now,



LEFT TO RIGHT Adam Kaplan in the *Kinky Boots* national tour • The incredible set from *Sweeney Todd*, built by set designer Reid Thompson ('97) •

both with organizational and creative aspects. There are really talented parents in Westport with a lot to offer.”

Roth comments, “Coming from the middle school, where parents were more involved, I realized it was a huge untapped resource.”

Long also works as a photographer and Roth credits her with lending an artistic eye to productions. “It’s one reason why the shows look so professional,” he comments. “She has such a vision in terms of lighting.” The tech crew is also lauded for a good portion of the magic that is conjured in Players shows.

Roth has continued to choose shows that

stretch the students and, like the directors before him, he doesn’t shy away from controversial material. Michael Sixsmith ('13) says, “Some schools wouldn’t do shows involving racism or gay people. Staples has a very liberal policy. We could do any show on any tough subject, as long as it’s good theater.” Sixsmith found himself in the spotlight of one of those shows when the Players got their biggest break in Roth’s tenure.

BROADWAY

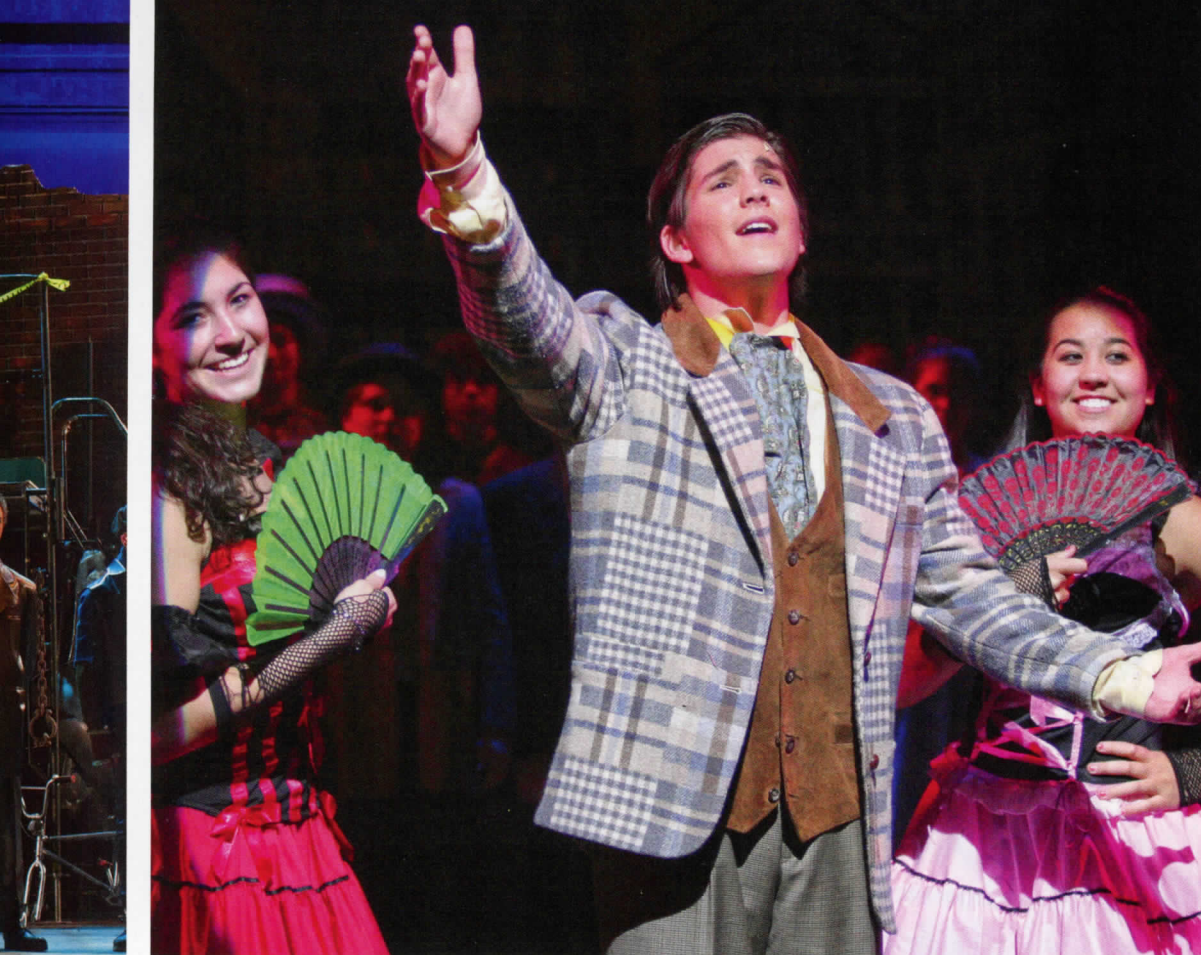
In 2013 the Players put on *A Chorus Line*, choreographed by Bradley Jones (Staples ’75),

who was in the original Broadway cast. The production, a sold-out smash hit, wowed over 6,000 audience members, including a woman named Terre Blair.

Terre, the widow of the great Marvin Hamlisch, composer of the original score for *A Chorus Line*, “had a friend in Westport,” recounts Sixsmith. “They saw signs for the show around town. Her friend asked if she’d like to see it; Terre was hesitant—it was soon after Marvin’s death—but she was told Staples Players is one of the best high school theater groups in the Northeast.” Blair secured a ticket with a little name-dropping. She congratulated the cast after the show, telling them it was amazing. Then she came again on closing night. “Mr. Roth calls Terre up to the stage and she tells us she wants us to perform at Marvin Hamlisch’s benefit concert on Broadway, where a bunch of famous people—like Joel Grey, Lucy Arnaz, Bernadette Peters—would be performing.”

“I LEARNED CREATIVE THINKING AND THEATRICAL INVENTIVENESS. I LEARNED HOW TO BE A LEADER. I LEARNED THE POWER OF GOOD THEATER.”

—JUSTIN PAUL



Adam Kaplan in *Mystery of Edwin Drood*

"A couple weeks before the event, she told us she wanted to do my song," says Sixsmith, "which was like insane!" Sixsmith played Richie, who sings "Gimme the Ball." It would be the opening number. "Fortunately, I was used to pressure situations from playing sports and acting my whole life," he says. "It was a pretty surreal event."

Clay Singer ('13), a ubiquitous *Players* star who gave up football for theater, says the night was "definitely the high point of my time with *Players* and possibly my life."

THE TAKEAWAY

"The kids are so talented here," says Roth, "that music directors come in and ask if there's something in the water in Westport." The "Alumni" section on staplesplayers.com lists scores of famous *Players*.

Linda Blair ('77) of *Exorcist* fame was a *Player*. Cynthia Gibb ('81) has enjoyed a long career: *Fame*, *Gypsy* opposite Bette Midler (for which

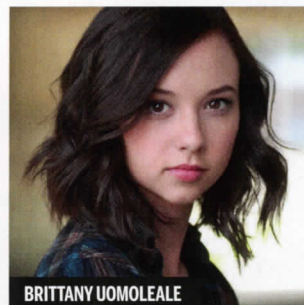
she earned a Golden Globe nomination), the lead in *The Karen Carpenter Story*, *Young Blood* and more. Michael Hayden ('82) went on to Juilliard and then Broadway (earning a Drama Desk Award nomination for his role as "Billy" in *Carousel*), film and TV. Reid Thompson ('97) does scenic design for Broadway and his high school alma mater (*Fiddler on the Roof*, *Sweeney Todd* and the upcoming *Music Man*). Alisan Porter ('99), the youngest *Star Search* winner at age five and famous child star of *Curly Sue*, went on to Broadway (*Footloose*, *A Chorus Line*—playing the same role her mom had) and a music career, with a high point being her recent victory on *The Voice*.

"Mr. Pia was so special," says Porter. "He was a master teacher and one of the coolest cats I've ever met. I think anyone who was lucky enough to be taught by him was forever changed. I learned so much about myself as a person and a performer from him." Porter's favorite role as a *Player* was "Anita" in *West*

FACES TO WATCH



CLAIRE SMITH



BRITTANY UOMOLEALE



CLAY SINGER



JUSTIN PAUL



CYNTHIA GIBB



LEFT TO RIGHT Brittany Uomoleale as Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* • Clay Singer and Claire Smith in *Oklahoma!*



ALISAN PORTER



ADAM KAPLAN

Side Story. “It was like being in a Broadway show,” she says. “It was my first real taste of live theater, and it was life changing.”

Justin Paul (’03) and his songwriting partner, Benj Pasek, have been named the “heirs of Rodgers and Hammerstein” by *Vanity Fair*. The pair has composed the music for *A Christmas Story* (garnering a Tony nomination), *Dear Evan Hansen* (Drama Desk Award), as well as TV. “I would not be doing what I’m doing now if it hadn’t been for my experience in Staples Players. I was allowed to stretch so many creative muscles in ways most high schoolers would never be able to,” states Paul, who both performed and conducted the orchestra during his time in Players. “I learned creative thinking and theatrical inventiveness. I learned how to be a leader. I learned the power of good theater.

Most of all, I truly learned how much I loved theater and music, and that I didn’t want to spend my life doing anything else.”

Brittany Uomoleale (’09), “Josie Garrett” on *Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders*, comments, “We rehearsed for hours and David encouraged us and taught us to take everything seriously, including how we prepare for each performance. He let us have fun, while also teaching us the importance of mentally warming up before a show. Mr. Roth is also the one who really encouraged me to pursue a BFA in college when I was doubting myself, so I owe him a lot.”

She adds, “Not many public high school theater programs are teaching Uta Hagen, improv, stage combat and how to dissect text. And not many high school theater programs are fortunate enough to have flying, moving

PAUL BY DIRTY SUGAR PHOTOGRAPHY; PORTER, CONTRIBUTED; OKLAHOMA! BY KERRY LONG

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"AS AN ACTOR YOU DON'T DETERMINE WHERE YOU'LL BE PLACED. BUT **YOU ARE YOU. THAT IS YOUR BEST WEAPON.**" -CLAIRE SMITH

sets (*Beauty and the Beast*), or be able to perform controversial shows like *The Laramie Project* and *Urinetown*."

Adam Kaplan ('08) landed on Broadway in *Newsies* straight out of college and is currently starring in the *Kinky Boots* Broadway tour. "David Roth was my second advisor in terms of different college programs and preparing me for my auditions," says Kaplan, who chose Elon University. "There was a ton of competition at Staples, so I recognized at an early age how competitive the business is. The production quality at Staples surpassed pretty much every high school I've seen and a lot of colleges for that matter. We had master classes with Tony-award winners! I learned early what would be expected of me and how hard I would have to work to be successful."

Kaplan also teaches workshops in New York and does private coaching with students

who are auditioning for college. "In between shows, it gives me purpose. It's really cool to see these kids grow as artists."

Clay Singer got into eight of the nine top programs he applied to and will graduate next year from Carnegie Mellon with hopes to head to the Big Apple. "I think our Staples Players class had six or seven students go into theater," he says. "Everyone ended up at amazing schools."

Sixsmith, who is at Holy Cross studying Mandarin Chinese and interned at Goldman Sachs during the summer, emphasizes the benefits of being in Players whether pursuing theater or not. "I think it was crucial to my success in getting into Goldman Sachs," says Sixsmith. "It helps with networking and interviewing; I could not have gotten through sixteen thirty-minute interviews and looked happy, excited and energetic

THE EDGE: TRAINING

The Staples Players has always had talented kids, but fans have noted an uptick in recent years. "Most of the Players are taking both voice and dance lessons now," says Kerry Long. "Many of the boys are taking dance. That has definitely brought the quality up."

Roth adds, "Now we have a lot of students who can sing, dance and act. That's a change in the last five or six years. Vocal coaches are a huge help."

Cynthia Gibb ('82), now a voice teacher and founder of Triple Threat Academy for Performing Artists, trains about ten Players and ten more who are preparing to audition. "I do voice training as well as acting coaching," she says. Competitive is

a word that pops up in conjunction with the Players, but Gibb makes a good point: "It's like everything else at Staples; there is so much talent that whether you are trying out for the football team or for Players, it gets competitive."

Many Players first honed their theater skills with Jill Jaysen at Center Stage Theater Company in Westport. Jaysen took Al Pia's adult acting class at Staples years ago and Pia became a mentor. "He raised the bar and did so in such a positive, loving environment," says Jill, who emulates that approach.

Roth brings up a key training ground—with no price tag: "The middle school programs are so important to the success of Players. It is there that these kids get the seeds of their passion. Both programs are terrific and give our students a tremendous base that we are able to build on. Staples Players would not be possible without them."

throughout, unless I was an actor. I couldn't have good conversations and connect with people unless I had emotional intelligence, which you get from theater. Being comfortable under pressure, performing in front of people, communication—the intangible skills theater equips you with is like a liberal arts education.”

Claire Smith ('15), who starred in too many *Players* shows to list, is currently taking a gap year to audition for theater programs and help finance her education. She will be studying English and theater at Wake Forest next fall.

She highlights another advantage actors have when applying to college: “In the scenario of college applications, let's be real, it's impossible to figure out ‘what they're looking for’ unless you're the one writing the acceptance letter. Who knows what the school wants that year? It's the same for auditions. You're not the person casting the show. As an actor you don't determine where you'll be placed. But you are *you*. That is your best weapon.”

She adds, “*Staples Players* helped me build and sustain confidence in myself as an actor and a person. I believe that to be invaluable.”

Kerry Long notes that the prestigious senior Key Award has gone to a *Player* each of the last four years. Every *Player* mentioned the bond they formed with their castmates. The directors all have commented on the rewarding process of a cast and crew working together to produce a successful show. It has molded and changed their lives. Moreover, the *Players* has brought joy to generations of theatergoers—and sometimes moves them well after the curtain drops. “In 2003 we did *Merrily We Roll Along*, in which Justin Paul played a Broadway composer and played the piano himself,” recounts Roth. “The show goes backwards in time. He had sold out at the end and he looks back on his life. A couple of people told us that they were so moved by it that they changed careers. It changed their lives. You can't get a bigger compliment than that.”

“The theater department at *Staples*,” concludes Paul, “is a true gift to the town of Westport.”

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