

Feature

New York Family

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March 26, 2010

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## WHERE KIDS ARE STARS

TADA! Youth Theater Gives Children The Skills They Need To Succeed On Stage And Off

By Lora Heller



The first rehearsal for “Wide- Awake Jake,” this season’s original musical at [TADA! Youth Theater](#), is underway, and there is a buzz of excitement in the air. Inside the rehearsal studio, a group of young performers learns choreography for a dance number, accompanied by the musical director on piano. Other cast members are scattered throughout the room, studying their lines. Supported by a strong team of professionals, the cast enjoys a palpable sense of purpose and camaraderie.

What makes TADA! unique is that each production is presented by kids—a mix of new and seasoned performers who range in age from 8–18. Co-founded in 1984 by Executive and Artistic Director Janine Trevens (known as Nina) and Linda Reiff, the program has grown into

one of the city’s most renowned training grounds for young actors, winning a Coming Up Taller Award for its youth programs in 2008 and a Drama Desk Award in 2009.

Though she grew up in the theater (her mother was a playwright and a theater critic), Trevens at first had no interest in pursuing a career in the performing arts; she wanted to work with children instead. But when she moved to New York to study psychology and education, Trevens took a job working at the box office for one of her mother’s productions, and she was hooked. Still wanting to make a difference in the lives of children, Trevens began working with youth performers, and before long, she had co-founded TADA!

Trevens and her team strive to provide kids of all backgrounds with a safe place where they feel like they belong. “Growing up is hard,” Trevens says. “Kids need a place where they feel nourished, challenged and just feel good about themselves.”

Each fall, kids from all over the city flock to auditions for TADA!’s Resident Youth Ensemble, a free, pre-professional theater training and youth development program. Once chosen, ensemble members can audition for one, two or all three of the yearly productions. Ensemble members are trained in subjects like music theory, dance, voice and diction, acting and improvisation. Once accepted, members can remain in the ensemble until they graduate from high school. Thanks to donor funding, TADA! ensemble members see Broadway shows and travel to meet youth companies in other parts of the U.S. Community service is also part of membership in the Resident Youth Ensemble, and older ensemble members complete apprenticeships. “Last year I was the assistant to our artistic director; this year I’m working in marketing,” explains Taylor, a 17-year-old Resident Youth Ensemble member.

Children who are interested in theater but not ready to make the commitment required to join the Resident Youth Ensemble can sign up for TADA!’s musical theater classes. TADA! also operates camps during school breaks and over the summer.

While TADA! helps kids hone their skills in acting, music and dance, Trevens is most proud of the fact that her students leave the program with something even more valuable.

“Some of our alumni are on Broadway and TV, while some have become doctors, teachers, moms or dads,” she says. “It’s really about the fact that they become whatever they want to become.” G

**Details:** 15 West 28th Street, 212-252- 1619, [tadatheater.com](http://tadatheater.com).

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Wide-Awake Jake Families can catch TADA! Youth Theater’s spring production, “Wide- Awake Jake,” from April 16 through May 23. Based on the children’s book by Helen Young, the musical chronicles the adventures of the decidedly notsleepy Jake—which include lions, dragons, giants and more! For tickets, call 212-252-1619 ext. 128 or visit [tadatheater.com](http://tadatheater.com).