

# CAMP VAN WEZEL

A new Backstage Theatre Camp adds to the hall's educational offerings and gives kids a peek into the working world of theater. By Kay Kipling

Campers learned about lighting on the mainstage.



Plenty of theater-minded kids get to learn and perform onstage at classes and camps in the area, both during the school year and during the summer. But something much rarer has been provided by a new program of the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall's education department: an opportunity to experience all the work that goes on backstage, with a possible path to future employment.

That's come about through the inaugural session of Backstage Theatre Camp at the Hall, last June. With the Hall's Director of Education and Community Engagement, Justin Gomiak, at the helm, 36 local teens, aged 12 to 18, spent a week with members of

the backstage stagehand/wardrobe union, IATSE Local 412, and the Van Wezel's tech department learning everything from handling a spotlight to sewing costumes to carpentry to working with hair and makeup.

"There are tons of arts camps in this community, that do what they do well," says Gomiak. "Our idea was 'What can we do that's different?'" The answer was the experience of working with "a professional union crew in



a giant space. So many kids don't necessarily want to be in front of the lights, and we need kids to work backstage, too."

Gomiak says the camp "created a kind of community; they bonded. And it lets the kids know this is a legitimate career path. Maybe college isn't the path for you, but you don't need to do that; the union can teach you what you need to know. We're talking about very specialized knowledge here, and there really isn't a pipeline, so this is a kind of apprenticeship."

Gomiak himself, who's been at the Van Wezel for a little over a year, has a background as a professional singer, dancer and actor in musical theater, performing in Broadway shows including *Seussical the Musical*, *Shrek the Musical* (which is onstage this season at the hall), understudying the Matthew Broderick role in *The Producers*, and appearing in a Roundabout Theatre production of *Anything Goes* with Joel Grey and Sutton Foster. At some point, he says, he decided to develop a parallel career as an educator while still acting.

"I became a teaching artist," he says, "so I would teach sometimes but mostly was still onstage. I felt I'd plateaued and was ready

to make a move, and literally that day I got a phone call from a place where I was a teaching

artist, offering me a full-time position at a private school in Manhattan." Ultimately, Gomiak received his

**"There really isn't a pipeline, so this is a kind of apprenticeship."**



Director of Education and Community Engagement Justin Gomiak's masterclasses for adults and teens offer a mix of theater, movement and fun.

master's degree in educational leadership, politics and advocacy at New York University, and felt primed for a move away from the hustle and bustle of the city.

"When COVID happened, I relocated down here, and this position [at the Hall] came up, so here we are. It's so neat because I'm learning a lot of the ins and outs of the presenting side of theater—the business of the business."

Gomiak says he inherited a rich education program already at the Van Wezel, including Schooltime Performances, often the first ex-



Teens at the backstage camp also learned about wig preparation and care.

perience for many local kids in the theater; arts integration activities, utilizing a staff of teaching artists in the schools presenting lessons connected to language arts; math, science and history; and partnering with community organizations to create pathways of access,

**“Our idea was, ‘What can we do that’s different?’”**

Gomlak also works closely with the Sarasota Performing Arts Foundation’s Kelli Maldonado. “We are so grateful for the Foundation’s financial support of our programs,” says Executive Director Mary BenseL.

The summer camp, which the Hall intends to reprise in the summer of 2024 on an expanded basis, “was delightful and unique and I think there’s a niche for it,” Gomlak says. In addition, the Hall is building a teen usher

whether it be with a senior citizen center or a school for persons with disabilities.

program so local students can earn Bright Futures scholarship hours while ushering and get to see a show for free as well.

Another education project: a masterclass series, playing off the Hall’s Broadway lineup. For each show, Gomlak “creates a masterclass, mostly dance/movement, using that show’s music and theme. This is designed primarily for adult audiences who just want to have a great time. They can be as advanced or beginner as they like. It’s a fun way to spend a morning.” Each Broadway show this season will feature at least one masterclass. BenseL adds, “Justin is a bright ray of sunshine at the Hall, and we are so thrilled to work on all his new offerings.”

*Interested in learning more, for yourself or your teen? Contact Justin in the Hall’s Education Department at (941) 263-6754 or visit [vanwezel.org](http://vanwezel.org).*



The Van Wezel's first-ever Backstage Theatre Camp welcomed teens to learn more from the pros who run the shows. Clockwise from top left: In the spotlight, center stage; head electrician Chuck Lawson; at the fly rail; applying makeup; in the spot booth; in the orchestra pit with technical director Nate Myers; sewing buttons with Justin Gomiak.