

## And 5, 6, 7, 8: Classes Give Directions to Broadway

By KAREN W. ARENSON  
The New York Times

Just off Washington Square Park, in a third-floor classroom at New York University, seven young women with gloves up past their elbows were wiggling their hips and singing "Take Back Your Mink" from "Guys and Dolls." Next door, Greg C. **Ganakas** was telling Erica Piccininni, a redheaded senior playing Adelaide, to be more whiny.

"Whiny would be good here," said Mr. **Ganakas**, the director. "It takes you away from being a baby. Remember, you're 30 years old."

While most college students were still on winter break last week, this small group of students was in its fourth eight-hour day of rehearsal, not for an extracurricular college show, but for a show that is an integral part of their education. They are enrolled in a small music theater program leading to a bachelor's degree, in the School of Education. The program is attracting scores of applicants looking for a steppingstone to the musicals of Broadway -- and a college education.

Students can study at respected music theater programs like those at the College-Conservatory of Music at the University of Cincinnati, Carnegie Mellon or the University of Michigan. But N.Y.U. is finding that its proximity to Broadway is a special draw,

making the school a kind of Broadway U.

Today, it has 76 undergraduate majors, up from fewer than 20 a decade ago. The 20-year-old program, which was given two full-time faculty members in 1995, received about 140 applications for 15 spots in the freshman class last year, said Lawrence Ferrara, chairman of the department of music and performing arts. (N.Y.U. also has a separate musical theater program in the Tisch School of the Arts, with more emphasis on acting and less on music.)

Sue Frost, associate producer at Goodspeed Musicals in East Haddam, Conn., where Mr. **Ganakas** sometimes works and which has been using N.Y.U. students and graduates in its shows, says she has seen a big increase in musical theater programs at colleges over the last 10 years. She attributes the increase to the surge of musicals on Broadway.

A college diploma is not necessary to land a job in a field where the ability to hit high C and execute double pirouettes is still critical. But students say it rounds them out and makes them more marketable, too.

"You don't really need a degree in musical theater, but it ups the ante,"

said Natalie Hill, a sophomore with a bold voice and a strong presence who played in a national touring company of "Footloose" over the summer but returned to school in September because she was eager to get her degree. "Being an N.Y.U. graduate says something about me," she said, "that I'm something more than this cute little singer who just got off the bus from Utah."

N.Y.U. has a tradition of offering professional training to undergraduates.

The music theater students take the same courses in music history, theory and sight singing and the same performance workshops as they would in a conservatory, but they must also complete the same liberal arts requirements -- math, science, history -- as other N.Y.U. students.

Theater executives say the students they see coming out of musical theater programs at N.Y.U. and other universities are often well prepared. "Some of the training is very strong," Ms. Frost said. "They know how to audition."

Lonny Price, who is about to open on Broadway in "A Class Act" (which he wrote with Linda Kline and which he is also directing), said he always advised young people to stay in school as long as they could before beginning their careers.

"It is great for actors to have a well-rounded education," he said. And,

recalling that he dropped out of the Juilliard School after a year, he said, "I regret that deeply."

The music theater program has even begun to attract experienced performers like Peter Lockyer, who plays Marius, the young lover in "Les Miserables" on Broadway, and David Osmond (a nephew of Donny and Marie Osmond), who has played Joseph in regional productions and in a national tour of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat."

Mr. Lockyer, a 27-year-old freshman, said that by studying music education, he hoped someday "to teach kids and save them from the trauma" he once suffered when he injured his voice and had to take a year off. He plans to take two weeks off from Broadway to play Sky Masterson, the big-time gambler who falls for a missionary, in N.Y.U.'s "Guys and Dolls."

Mr. Osmond, a tall, husky 21-year-old, will be the master of ceremonies at the Hot Box Night Club and a featured dancer in the show. And Merrill West, another student with professional experience as a Rockette, will also be a featured dancer and a Hot Box showgirl.

In N.Y.U.'s program, participation in shows like "Guys and Dolls" is not required for graduation; there is no guarantee that students will even win parts when they audition. But unlike typical extracurricular shows, only students in the School of Education can land roles. (Exceptions include a

couple of professionals and faculty members who have character roles like that of Nathan Detroit, and N.Y.U.'s president, L. Jay Oliva, who has a singing part as Arvide Abernathy, the guardian of the mission sister Sarah Brown.)

Of about 150 students who auditioned for "Guys and Dolls," only 35 won roles. But most students view the opportunity to perform under professional direction as a significant component of their educational experience.

"What appealed to me is that you didn't have to wait to perform," said Rosie North, a sophomore music theater major from St. Louis who is another Hot Box girl.

The emphasis on musicality was very much in evidence last weekend, as the Hot Box girls threw off their minks, fluttered their arms and kicked their legs over and over. There were no whimpers, no complaints.

Each time, they strutted as if they were making their Broadway debuts. And each time, Mark Esposito, the show's choreographer, who was also the dance supervisor and performer in the 1992 Jerry Zaks revival of "Guys and Dolls" on Broadway, saw something to tweak: the way they twisted their bodies, the way their knees bent, the way they waved their cigarette lighters.

"Work those fingers," he told them.

"Don't do this," he said, twisting his arms. "It's just your wrists."

"When I run a rehearsal, I run it like they're being paid," he said later. "I don't spoon-feed them."

By Sunday afternoon, he was satisfied enough to show it to Mr. **Ganakas**, who in addition to being director of the show is the artistic director of the entire musical theater program. The two men climbed onto stools at the front of the studio to watch as the students paraded through their numbers. Rehearsals were still in their first week, but the pace was quick, leaving some students red-faced and panting. It was clearly not a production for neophytes or for those not in good shape.

The show, which opens for six performances in the Frederick Loewe Theater at N.Y.U. beginning Feb. 16, is the most elaborate of several scheduled for the year, and is budgeted at about \$100,000. Other productions this semester will include a chamber production of a new work, and a showcase for industry professionals featuring the 16 seniors and 8 graduate students who will be graduating from the music theater program this year.

On Sunday afternoon, the students ran through several numbers, including "Take Back Your Mink" and "Sit Down, You're Rockin' the Boat," and then to the fast-paced "Crapshooters' Dance," which sent the male dancers skidding on their

knees, with Mr. Osmond finishing at Mr. **Ganakas's** feet.

"That's really impressive," Mr. **Ganakas** said, looking somewhat startled as he peered down at Mr. Osmond and then out at the other students. "Great work."

Still, Mr. **Ganakas**, notebook in hand, had tips for many of the performers. He warned the cast not to sound "too vaudeville." He cautioned the young women that they were "not really being the girls yet." And he told Reggie Houze, a graduate student from Mississippi who was playing Nicely-Nicely Johnson, not to sound

too classical.

At the end of the rehearsal, Mr. Houze asked if Mr. **Ganakas** would chat with him further about his delivery.

Mr. **Ganakas** waved him off, assuring him that it would come.

"Don't lose sleep over it," he said. "It's your training. It will come in handy someday."

"Yeah," Mr. Houze said morosely. "Someday."

**Images: Photo: Rehearsing for N.Y.U.'s production of 'Guys and Dolls' next month are, from right, David Osmond, Eric Jackson and Michael Harrington. (Aaron Lee Fineman for The New York Times)**

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