

# ACTING UP

## Local Acting Schools Bring On The Drama — In NYC-Caliber Style

**G**etting ready to head down to Tribeca or Bank Street to get the full benefit of big-time performing arts programs? Put down your train schedule and see what's acting up right here in suburbia.

Acting schools in Westchester County run by seasoned theatre professionals are drawing talented kids from all over the Hudson Valley region and offering them valuable NYC-caliber training onstage and off.

"Over the years, our radius has grown," explained Howard Meyer, an actor, director and playwright who for the last 12 years has been nurturing the Axial Theatre Company in Pleasantville, as well as the Howard Meyer Acting Program in Yorktown Heights, now in its 18th year. "Our students come from all over Westchester as far south as Yonkers, Scarsdale and White Plains, north from Poughkeepsie, across the Tappan Zee Bridge from Rockland, and from

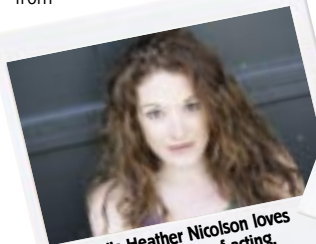


**Westchester Sandbox Theatre caters to young performers who dream of making it big some day.**

Western Connecticut. "We offer a safe room for young people to take risks, build relationships with each other that go on for years, and establish bonds in the community. They can be vulnerable with teachers whom they trust," said Meyer. Heather Nicolson is one of those teachers at Meyer's School.

She arrived in New York in 2009 from Denver, Colorado where her favorite college program was with an acting professor who created original theatre pieces spotlighting social change.

"The theatre is a great vehicle for that," says Nicolson, who feels she is incredibly lucky to be teaching kids and teens the art of acting and to be there for them as they



**Axial's Heather Nicolson loves teaching the art of acting.**



**Young actors Willa DeRose and Ryan Mallon appear in a scene from Howard Meyer's recent play.**



**Howard Meyer director of the Axial Theatre Co. and the Howard Meyer Acting Program.**

take risks. "Kids are the bravest people in the world. Feeling empowered is important as you go forward, and I tell them let's get comfortable speaking in front of people because you want to be heard."

The freedom to be creative is what drew Daniel Ferrante to acting and directing. "I was a bit of a wild child, and the performance arts focused me," said Ferrante who now owns and manages the Westchester Sandbox Theatre in Mamaroneck where kids K-12 can get solid performing experience. "I acted in regional theatre at Long Island's Cultural Arts Playhouse, a social place where young people could be creative and be with others who enjoyed the same things."

For the last two years, Ferrante and some very experienced colleagues have devoted themselves to top-notch productions at Sandbox. "The staff is comprised of people who do this elsewhere in a professional setting," said Ferrante. "With acting, lighting, sound, sets, we operate at a very high level that students do not get in school. We put time, energy and resources into each event. I really want people who are willing to put themselves into their job, do their best and whatever it takes to get the job done."

Parent response has been overwhelming: "They love Sandbox because it's a place geared toward like-minded young people who receive positive reinforcement, grow, learn and take care of one another. Our long term goal is to keep doing what we're doing and get more and more kids involved."

For Howard Meyer, the

seeds of his passion for the theatre were sown in New York City where he taught acting during the late 1980s. "From the very onset I had the notion that my life would be about NYC-caliber training and theatre in Westchester County. The school has met and exceeded all my expectations. It is now geared toward teaching anybody with the talent and interest. My core group of actors, directors and playwrights are local people, taught and trained at my school, who earned their way into the professional company."

Recently, 11-year old Willa DeRose was cast in Howard Meyer's original play, *Welcome: This Is a Neighborhood Watch Community*, produced at the Axial Theatre in November 2010. "From the age of three, Willa has been interested in acting and singing," explained Brenda DeRose, Willa's mom. "After being in several school/camp performances and taking voice

lessons, we began the search for an acting school that focused on technique, rather than songs and choreography for a specific performance."

"In Heather Nicolson's class, Willa learned to be part of an ensemble of talented people, to be confident with her natural talent, and to be open to new experiences," continued Mrs. DeRose. "Heather, Howard, the other students and the whole Axial community warmly supported her beyond the rehearsal time and into the run of the show, giving her confidence to perform with adults and to continue to explore her character with every performance."

"The satisfaction we get in doing what we love is contagious for the kids," said Dan Ferrante, whose classes are structured at three different levels. Recently, Sandbox has produced such shows as *Aladdin*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Urinetown*.  
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**Sandbox is a fun place for kids to act up!**

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Axial's Rachel Jones (left) works with young people who aspire to be actors.

Upcoming on the roster are *Honk* and *101 Dalmations* for the little ones, *Bye Bye Birdie* for tweens, *Little Women* for teens, and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* and *Little Shop of Horrors* for the older students.

"Whether someone thinks he or she is born to act or is just drawn to it is factor in how they will develop," says Nicolson. "Do they want to be an actor or do they want to be famous? We focus on improv, scene work, voice work, or just standing still. We ask the kids to go to emotional places where they are honest with themselves and feel empathy towards others."

Meyer reports that at the end of one of his sessions during the wrap up, his teens made revealing comments: "Before this class, the young people said they only viewed adults as teachers, authority figures or parents. By the time the class had ended, they perceived adults as people with the same humanity as themselves. It's an ongoing experience where all new people start out together as beginners, and then teens are mentored in so many different ways toward positive life development."



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