

# Lifting the Age Limit

Teens take over cast of Shedd Theatrical's *Sweet Charity*



Laura Sue Hiszczynskij and Dylan Stasack in *Sweet Charity*

A young woman shows up in New York City with her heart quite literally on her sleeve. This innocent is taken in by every type of con man imaginable, as she tries to make a living as a taxi dancer at the seedy Fandango Ballroom.

A perfect cautionary tale for teens, right?

Whether or not they get the message, the folks at Shedd Theatricals have seen fit to let young people take over the telling of *Sweet Charity*, which opens Thursday, June 14, at the Shedd. Teens make up nearly one-third of the cast.

These talented youths are chatting in a crowded, colorful jumble in the Jaqua concert hall when I pop in to ask a few questions about singing and dancing in the adult world of Shedd Theatricals.

"My first show here was really intimidating," high-school senior Liza Clark says. "But I've been the token child around here for a long time. I've learned a lot."

From figuring out what to do at a dance call to developing a background in the history of American musical theater, the performers appreciate getting a leg up in the theater world at a young age.

Zoe Mueller, who at 21 claims elder status at the interview, says, "We've learned to do a really quickly paced show," with less than three weeks of rehearsal. All those present, who represent the solo-singing stars in their respective drama programs, understand that to make it as actors they need to learn to be a cohesive part of the chorus. "And it's a lot more fun," says Emma Sohlberg, who played the leading role of Kate Fothergill in last summer's *Girl Crazy*.

But it's important to note that although educative at heart, the Shedd isn't running a charity school. They cast these kids because they're good. "We don't play around," says Shedd executive director Jim Ralph. "We expect them to act like adults."

Actor Matthew Woodward notes that it is easier to work here than in a more lax setting. "Here we're under union rules, we're professionals."

Kids like working under rules? When I ask which union rule they find most valuable, the answer is unanimous.

"Breaks!" says UO student Tatiana Young. "We get breaks." Here the young actors dissolve into a discussion of theater horror stories: former directors keeping them reading notes until midnight; being stuck in tech-run hell for hours on end; and never being able to go to the bathroom.

"You have to respect your fellow actors," Clark says. Under these rules, the young actors feel respected in turn.

And they deserve it. These students are a nice representation of the extremely skilled young performers now cutting their teeth in Eugene. Local high school and college students from UO and Lane Community College make up the bulk of the group. Dylan Stasack and Sohlberg both attend the University of Michigan where, according to Tony Award-winning director and writer James Lapine, they are "turning out the best young musical theatre performers in the business these days." Stasack notes that, "less than two percent of all who audition get in."

When I asked about playing taxi dancers (dime-a-dance girls, one short step from a prostitutes), the young women were unfazed. Young says that as an actor, "You're gonna be playing characters who do things that you wouldn't do." Sohlberg concurs, "Theater is about real people with real stories."

But for all their maturity and talent, 19-year-old Stasack is still playing opposite a 40-year-old woman he's known since before he could drive a car.

Contending that nothing happening on stage is about how many years an actor has been plodding the globe, Stasack notes that "it's about the characters, and how they are connected."

Talent, it seems, has no age limit. **ew**

*Sweet Charity runs June 14-17 at the Shedd; theshedd.org or call 434-7000.*

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