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The Call of Broadway

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By LYNNE AMES

USE the imagination: a suburban living room, filled with sofa and chairs and coffee table covered with little ornaments, becomes a Broadway theater. The piano in the center of the room is a full orchestra. The handful of singers multiplies to a full cast, singing, dancing, emoting so they'll tear your heart right out.

This leap in perception is what Peter Sklar, producer, composer and lyricist of "The Kid Who Played the Palace," was counting on one recent night. Mr. Sklar, 36 years old, coaches children, some of them already celebrities, in singing and acting. Three times a year he runs a week-and-a-half program in theater arts upstate. For youngsters who want to be in show business, he organizes showcases for budding talent. He has an apartment in Manhattan and a home here.

Mr. Sklar also has a kind of universal show-business dream, to see his work on the proverbial Great White Way. During the last few months, he has been raising money to take "The Kid Who Played the Palace" to Broadway. He has wooed potential investors at backers' auditions at Sardi's and at the Westside Arts Theater in Manhattan. Now, he was trying it out in his own home, in front of a group of interested friends and strangers.

"Hi, fo'ks," he said, in a deep voice that, throughout the evening, would itself prove to be Broadway quality. "Tonight you'll see a very condensed version of a two-hour musical about the dreams and dilemmas of a man named Murray Rosen, a former song-and-dance man from vaudeville, now an acting coach for professional kids in today's electronic world of show business."

The show, he added, is also about the struggle and triumph of the cadre of children — tots to teenagers — that Mr. Murray coaches. "It's a family-oriented show: one, we feel, that could generate a cast album, a national tour" — a faraway gleam in the eye — "even film and television rights."

His voice took on a confidential tone. "What we're looking for tonight is front money — money that will put us in a workshop situation. We need \$50,000. The purpose of a workshop is to flesh out the production, see the work done and to raise capital — \$3 million to \$4 million — for the actual Broadway production." A few members of the audience, not experienced in Broadway economics, drew in their



breath in surprise. Smiling, Mr. Sklar gently explained, "Eighty thousand dollars for a workshop, by the way, is quite reasonable."

It might be argued that no price can be put on hope. Mr. Sklar, who has a master's degree in education from Harvard University and studied piano and music theory at the Juilliard School of Music, maintains that there are two great loves in his life: young people and music. Among his clients have been Ricky Schroder, star of the movie, "The Champ" and the CBS series, "Silver Spoons," and Allison Smith, who played the title role in a Broadway production of "Annie" and has a lead role in the CBS show, "Kate and Allie."

There have also been hundreds of others, age 7 to 25 or so, who have come for practice sessions bearing talent and desire along with their monologues, advertising copy and songs. Like the children in Murray's class, they want to act in commercials, movies, television shows, plays — anything that gives them a chance to act and sing.

Mr. Sklar also conducts discussion groups for the young performers. It was out of these groups that "The Kid Who Played the Palace" evolved. "I put these kids in a discussion group, so they could talk about their lives in the business," he recalled. "About what it was like to be in it. Later, I sat down at the piano and started playing with music and lyrics."

The result: ballads, blues, country-and-western tunes and a few of those lilting melodies that seem to exist only in musical comedies, the kind of numbers critics call "hummable." The story, by David Scher, and book, by Jerry Brown, followed. Like the songs, the story has a kind of recognizable appeal, with Murray, the outmoded but wise and kindly vaudevillean; Amy, the 13-year-old su-

perstar sent to him for some toning down (her nice side emerges by the play's conclusion); and Kelly, 14, sweet, ambitious and insecure.

For the backers' audition, Mr. Sklar played piano and sang the role of Murray, after explaining that he is about half the character's age. Christy Graves, a 15-year-old with long blond hair and the face of a Christmas-card cherub; Amy Beth Bernstein, an impish 10-year-old brunette; and Renee Ford, 14, ponytail and even features, rotated as Amy and Kelly. Greg Nickel, 16, and David Lascher, 16, filled in the ranks.

"Buy America's favorite," they sang. "No. 1 breakfast. No. 1 toy. America's No. 1 pride and joy. Buy America's favorite. No. 1 girl and boy."

"Was that meant to be an advertisement?" Rose Kogan, sitting in the audience, asked later. "'Try No. 1.' What was that?"

"It's a simulated commercial," Mr. Sklar replied. "The show is about a confrontation of values — those of Murray's era and our era. A kid who does one commercial for McDonald's could make a lot more money than someone like Murray made in a whole lifetime in vaudeville."

The people watching were also interested in the character of Murray. They applauded loudly for a ballad he sings at the conclusion of the first act. "Now I'm supposed to step aside, forget the kids, forget your pride, think positive — you'll find something else instead. Be grateful for the time you had. Nothing lasts forever. Be a sport — roll over and play dead."

The number that drew the most enthusiastic response from the audience was "Stage Mother Blues." Kelly and Amy, having finally got over their resentment of each other, join forces in a duet: "I got them stage mother blues, them pushy, pushy stage



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Amy Beth Bernstein, top left, and Renee Ford preparing for audition. Peter Sklar, above, with young performers. Audience members, right.



mother blues!" they sang. "My mom didn't like my hair, it was her idea to dye it. And although my agent didn't care, mom still said, try it! Well, no need to cry, no need to pout. I can still make it big, cause, even though my hair fell out, I got a wig for every gig!"

When the performance was over, the youngsters and some of their parents gathered around Mr. Sklar for an impromptu version of his discussion groups. Jack Harpman, the director, who was himself a child actor, and Sybil Sklar — Mr. Sklar's mother — looked on and listened.

"The image of the overtly pushy stage mother that we remember from 'Gypsy' is passé," Mr. Sklar said. "Things are more subtle now, more 'enlightened.' No kid from the 80's is going to admit being pressured, and no parent is going to admit to pressuring. Now you have parents who say things like, 'This is what my child wants to do — we do whatever makes my child happy.'"

"You still do hear a lot about the evils of show business, the damage it does to children," he continued.

"There's a tremendous residue of horror stories about child stars of the 1920's and 30's being pushed around by directors and casting directors. But nowadays a child's experience for a few minutes with a casting director — who, by the way, is usually a polite, pleasant individual — is not going to do any damage. It's the second audition — the one that takes place in the car on the way home — that is the really significant one for a child. The way the parents ask the child how he or she did is what counts. That's Mommy or Daddy, the people whose love and approval you really need."

Gale Graves, Kristy's mother, explained that while she and her family have made many sacrifices for Kristy — moving to New York from Florida among them — her prime

concern was Kristy's happiness.

Caroline Nickel, Greg's mother, added that although she wanted her son to pursue whatever career he desired, "financially, he'd be better off as a plumber."

And what does Mrs. Sklar think of her grown-up boy? someone asked. Is she proud?

"I don't see why he can't play all the roles in the show," she answered, perfectly deadpan. "Kids, everything."

"Mom," Mr. Sklar said, playing along. "We need the kids. They're the right age."

"Oh, go on," Mrs. Sklar said, not missing a beat. "Try it. I want to see you up there on the Broadway stage. After all, a mother is a mother, is a mother."