

THE DALTONIAN

Menu

🏠 Home » 2023 » December » 20 » The Dalton Middle School Prepares Newsies



ARTS

The Dalton Middle School Prepares Newsies

DECEMBER 20, 2023 BY MIKA HIGGINS-WOO

Extra! Extra! Read all about it! The winter middle school musical will be Disney's hit: *Newsies*!

Newsies is a musical based on the true story of the New York City newsboys' strike of 1899. It focuses on the endearing relationships between homeless, but extremely hardworking, boys and girls (nicknamed "newsies") who sell papers in the streets to earn a living, and the story of how they collectively took on powerful newspaper tycoons who sought to exploit them.

The story begins when wealthy and powerful newspaper owner Joseph Pulitzer raises the price that newsies have to pay for papers they buy from *The World*, (the newspaper owned by Pulitzer) in order to then sell to the public. The increase is so large that it would force them to sell twenty more papers in order to earn the same amount of money as before. While ten cents doesn't seem like a lot today, for boys looking for a cheap meal more than 100 years ago, that was a major loss. Motivated by the oldest newsie, Jack Kelly, (along with his cerebral friend Davey and Davey's little brother Les), the boys organize a strike to protest Pulitzer's raised price. Alongside this plot, Katherine, a promising female reporter, breaks the glass ceiling for female reporters and writes the story of the newsies' strike, falling in love with Jack in the process. The show ends on a happy, yet realistic note.

The theatrical version of *Newsies* is based on a movie which came out in 1992. This film was revolutionary because it included male characters dancing and singing in the process of telling a true New York story. The 1992 movie, fondly referred to by its fan base on the Internet as "92ises," inspired a generation of young male dancers to audition for the Broadway version of the *Newsies* musical on which they grew up.

Newsies, the musical, had three main creators. The book (or the words in the production that are spoken rather than sung) was written by Harvey Fierstein, the lyrics by Jack Feldman and the music by Alan Menken. Many may recognize Alan Menken from his work on Disney movie musicals such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *Pocahontas*, *Tangled*, *Hercules*, and many more Disney classics!

Newsies opened on Broadway in 2012 and won Tony awards for best choreography and best original score. The stage production ran for 1,004 performances. A 2017 reunion performance of it was recorded and put on Disney Plus, where it remains today. Also in 2017, *Newsies* ran regionally in Pittsburgh, on the Arena Stage. Recently, a revival production of *Newsies* played on the West End in London, closing in July 2023.

The Dalton middle school will perform *Newsies* on January 31 and February 1 at 4:30pm and February 2 and 3 at 7:00pm. *The Daltonian* caught up with Rory Boyd who will be directing *Newsies* in his debut as middle school musical director to discuss his vision for the production. Boyd is essentially a *Newsies* expert: he's seen it, been in it and now he's directing it! His enthusiasm for the project was evident and, as you will see, jumps right off the page.

Why did you decide to do *Newsies* now? What about *Newsies* is relevant to the present day?

I once heard Newsies described as a 'gold standard musical for today,' and I think I agree with that characterization: it's got a knockout score, compelling book and crazy-catchy lyrics. What's more, it's a story about finding empowerment through making change together. Today's world is, in some lamentable respects at least, not all that different from that of the newsies in 1899 New York: we're still fighting many similar injustices and discriminatory practices in a whole range of arenas that we see depicted in Newsies. It serves to remember that the story in this musical actually happened. It was the children of New York who protested long and hard enough for the city to grind to a halt and change to be brought about. I look around today and see inspiration in the activism of so many young people today, fighting today's fights and not waiting to be invited by the 'grown-ups' to have a seat at the table. A century or so aside, there's not all that much difference between the Jack Kellys and the Greta Thunbergs of the world. In that sense, Newsies has everything to do with today. It reminds us that we have in the past, and can again today fight for and create a better tomorrow.

What is your history with *Newsies* (have you been in it, directed it, or seen it before)?

Yes to two of the above! I was in a production of it in 2019 which introduced me to the power of the show. I've also seen it, the movie of the stage musical of course but also the recent West End revival. I'm taking inspiration from elements of all three!

What are some different adaptations you've seen of *Newsies* and what are some examples of things you've liked and didn't like about those?

The West End production was immersively staged. The one I was in was in-the-round. Both therefore took the show out of the proscenium arch staging that the Broadway original used which, I feel, liberates the urgency and dynamism of the show, making more palpable for the audience the relevance of the story. Knowing that we have a proscenium arch in the Martin Theater, I started brainstorming with Meg Zeder, our resident amazing Set Designer, how we might implement elements of immersive theater into our production. I'm excited to say she came up with some really cool ideas that you will see in performance!

Moreover, both the West End and the production I was in in 2019, reimagined the gender diversity of the newsies. Given that none of my research suggests the occupation of newspaper-selling, or the discrimination the newsies were subjected to was exclusive to boys, it seems apparent that having a gender diverse cast for the newsies is indeed a more accurate and more appropriate vehicle for the storytelling, as well as being inclusive.

What is your overall vision for this show?

This is a difficult one! Overall, I want to make our production unique to us. Rather than paying homage to what's come before, I want above all for our production to feel, look, and sound like it has been created by, reflects, and belongs to our middle school community.

Can you speak a little bit about your casting decisions with this show?

Of course, casting for any show in any arena is a challenge and yet, as I once heard from a former director of mine, ninety percent of good directing is good casting!

Casting within a middle school community can honestly be even more challenging as there are many more factors to consider, but, if you've picked a show which you are confident reflects the community itself and you are considerate of the identities within that community and those of the characters in the show, you are set up for success. We set out to do that from the offset, so that students would feel affirmed in their roles, and so that the stories of the characters onstage would be honored.

As I mentioned before, I knew I wanted to have a diverse group of newsies, in terms of gender, grade level and race. The misconception of the newsies being exclusively male irked me and I felt we have an opportunity to change that by reflecting in our casting more accurately the diversity of the children of New York City in 1899 and, in so doing, the diversity of our own middle school community.

How do you plan on tackling the challenge of having many young kids who don't have a background in tap dance in this very dance-heavy show? Are you going to find a substitute for tap?

There will be some tap for sure, but definitely not as much as in the Broadway show where the majority of the cast were tappers. Blake Pearson, our wonderful choreographer, and I started brainstorming early on about bringing in other choreographic influences into numbers, such as 'King of New York' that have traditionally been viewed as tap-heavy. You can expect to see and hear some Stomp, clogging, ceilidh, soft shoe, and many other multicultural choreographic references!

Do you have any specific visions for the set and costumes for this show?

I asked Meg [Zeder, the set designer for Newsies] early on for a playground that looked like scaffolding and that can make noise, a set that is a character in itself – she took this direction and ran with it. I'm so excited for everyone to see the set she's creating with the Theater Tech and Stagecraft students! In terms of costume, I asked our resident Costume Designer extraordinaire Ilana Breitman to bring as much color and patterns into the newsies' costumes as possible. I was a little tired of the moody, downtrodden grays and sepias of productions past.

Did the auditions go the way you expected them to, or were you surprised by some things?

I was blown away by the level of preparation, passion, and talent in our middle school! The auditionees were all a credit to the school in the way they handled the challenging song cuts and went about the audition process as a whole.

How do you feel about directing your first Middle School musical at Dalton?

Excited! I certainly have big shoes to fill, having seen the quality of productions under [former middle school play director] Mr Gallagher's direction! It's a huge undertaking for everyone involved to put on a full-scale musical in such little time, but with commitment from all and a clear vision, we will get there!

What is your favorite line/lyric from the show?

So difficult to pick just one! The show is chalk full of excellent lyric-writing... there's plenty of lyrics exemplary in scene-setting, plot and/or character development. All that said, [to encapsulate]the sentiment of the show in one phrase, I'd have to go for: "Then say to the others/Who did not follow through/You're still our brothers/And we will fight for you."

What else do you want the Dalton community to know about this production?

Please come out and support our Middle Schoolers in this endeavor. Whether you know Newsies, or don't, love it or hate it, I promise you this production will be packed with surprises and knockout performances!

Boxes:

Outfitting the Newsies

Costume Designer Ilana Breitman

What is your overall vision for this production's costumes? How is it different or similar to the way newsies have been costumed in the past?

My grand plan for Newsies has two parts: [To] follow the historical research and [to] give each newsie a specific identity. So far the research has yielded a more diverse range of clothes (Skirts and dresses! Ethnic and cultural clothing! Jackets! Ties!) then in the Broadway production, so I hope to incorporate that. And rather than each chorus newsie being a variation [of] the same theme ([wearing] blue or brown with a waistcoat), I'm using a wider range of colors and clothing details, like baseball team pins, to give hints as to individual identity.

What is going to be the biggest challenge in creating and designing the costumes for this show?

The biggest challenge in creating and designing costumes for shows at Dalton is always juggling the moving parts. Between cast changes, discoveries in rehearsal, opinions, budget, paperwork, buying, renting, building, keeping things organized-ish, it's always a high wire act. Actually designing or creating is never the challenge – or at least, never a bad challenge.

What is your favorite line/lyric from the show?

In [the song] King of New York – "Suddenly, I'm respectable / Starin' right at 'cha lousy with stature" has cracked me up since I saw the movie in the 90s.

Creating the Onstage World for *Newsies*

Set Designer Meg Zeder

Add questions here

Responses Coming Soon

Talking to Two Jack Kellys

Three of the lead roles in *Newsies* have been double casted this year: Jack, Katherine and Pulitzer. *The Daltonian* talked to the two actors who will portray Jack Kelly on different nights: Ayah Wood and Cooper Mandell.

Ayah Wood

How are you preparing for this role, physically and psychologically?

I am constantly playing show tunes... even though I know all the lyrics and melodies of the showtunes, it helps me to immerse myself in the Newsies world; plus, the songs are pretty catchy and fun to listen to. The world created in Newsies is so captivating, and there's so much history to the piece that most people don't know about, so I've been trying my best to get a sense of what was truly happening during the period in which Newsies is set. Even though Newsies is a generally lighthearted, fun show, the ideas of child labor and community explored in the show are really quite profound. I've also been spending a lot of time trying to figure out who Jack is so that I can fully embody him as a person instead of just playing his role. He doesn't give much away about himself, so it's been difficult trying to figure out how I want to play his character as someone who is different in almost every way.

How does it feel to be cast in a male role as a woman?

It's exciting. I often feel that women's roles in many musicals set in the past are quite superficial and uptight, which makes it difficult to experiment with their character. Jack, on the other hand, has a lot of depth to his character that can be explored, and played differently with each actor. I was so excited when the cast lists came out because I knew that Jack would be a much different experience for me than any other character I've played before. Of course I was also nervous to try and play Jack. It's going to be more difficult for me to play him than someone who identifies as male because there's so many male stereotypes and

stereotypical coming of age moments in Newsies that I haven't had experience with as a female-identifying person. There are several moments throughout the show where Jack portrays stereotypes of toxic masculinity or misogyny that are very important to his character arc. These moments will be the most difficult for me to act out, but moments that I will stay true to nonetheless in order to stay true to his character.

What is Newsies message, and– why is it a timely production?

It's really a story about togetherness and support. The newsies always support each other, even when it seems like they're losing, they stick together; even when times get rough, they stick together. The Newsies aren't just a group of boys, they're a family. A story like this teaches us that strong community and support systems are vital in times of crisis. The Newsies' story also shows us that even kids can make a change. Newsies is a musical based on true events. The Newsboys of New York were able to make a change by working together and supporting each other. The youth are capable of helping and contributing to the world, and should do so whenever they can.

What is your favorite line or lyric in the show?

My favorite line from the show is: "I don't need the limp to sell papes! I got poiysonality"

Cooper Mandell

How are you preparing for this role,physically and psychologically?

I have had the cast album playing repeatedly for the past few weeks, really trying to understand the feeling behind the songs. Newsies doesn't just tell the story of a single boy, it tells the story of an entire genre of people. For me, understanding the show means understanding everyone's stories. I once heard that baseball players imagine themselves hitting home-runs, so that when they step up to the plate, they are in the right headspace. I have been doing a lot of mental work to prepare for Jack, because there is a lot to uncover about his personality. I think it's important to understand my character. Jack bottles up a lot of

his emotions and tries to appear as a “tough guy.” I feel that one of the most important parts of portraying a character is understanding the character. Because little is revealed on a deeper level about him, I have been given a fair amount of creative liberty to portray him how I see him. Ayah and I are going to play two different Jacks, and I think working with her to better understand my Jack will be incredibly beneficial.

What is *Newsies* message, and why is it a timely production?

I think the main difference between the world of Newsies and our world today is the time period. Other than that, people are experiencing the same things. When I first learned the story of Newsies, I immediately thought of the Sag-Afta strikes going on. Newsies is about standing together, and sticking up for what is right. In our world today, it is more important than ever that we stand together as our friends face a variety of challenges. The Newsies are a rag-tag group of orphans, who somehow strike, and achieve their goal. Newsies shows us that no matter who we are, if we band together, we can make a change.

What is your favorite line or lyric in the show?

My favorite line in the show is “the world is ya erster”

◀ PREVIOUS POST

Monthly Album Review: September/October Edition

NEXT POST ▶

Discipline and Punishment to Learning and Growth: Dalton’s Approach to Student Conduct

Leave a Reply

Logged in as Mika Higgins-Woo. [Edit your profile.](#) [Log out?](#) Required fields are marked *

Comment * *

Post Comment

Copyright All Rights Reserved 2022