

For Nearly Four Decades, MST&DA Has Nurtured Islanders' Love of the Stage – and Launched Careers

by Dottie Jeffries

Over the last 37 years, the Main Street Theatre & Dance Alliance (MST&DA) has offered acting, dance, and music classes to hundreds of kids on Roosevelt Island. For many, this community theater has served as the glue that bonded Islanders together – children as well as adults – even as friends attended different schools, competed in different sports, and practiced different faiths. For some, like actress Valentina Guerra (née Lugo), the MST&DA experience also ignited a spark that would grow into a lifelong passion for the performing arts.

“Being on the MST&DA stage, having permission to speak out and having everyone listen to me was empowering,” says Guerra, who is currently pursuing an acting career in Los Angeles. “It gave me the foundation for a career that I didn’t know I wanted. I don’t know if I would have had the courage to pursue this acting career if not for my years at MST&DA.”

Scattered across the country, and throughout the brightly lit world of the performing arts in New York City, are dozens of working dancers, actors, and artists like Guerra who can trace their journeys back to a youth spent as part of MST&DA. These graduates are now playwrights working to create social change, award-winning actors, professional opera singers, touring musicians, film directors, arts educators, and more. We caught up with more than a dozen of them to see where they are today and how their time at the Island’s community theater has impacted their lives and work.

The Seed of an Idea

The Main Street Theatre & Dance Alliance got its start in 1982, after Gibson Glass, a director, had the idea to open a theater company on the Island. Resident Diana Baffa-Brill soon joined the effort, forming a board of directors and ultimately raising money for a three-show season at Goldwater Hospital, which stood where Cornell Tech is today.

“Glass spent all of the money on the first show,” recalls former Director

Nancy Howe. “Diana called my husband, Worth, to come in, save the day, and run what had come to be known as the Main Street Theatre.” Following the first Goldwater production, the theater company moved, sharing space with the Youth Center. Years later, it moved again, this time to the Cultural Center, where it remains today.

Howe says the organization began offering children’s acting classes as a way to support the professional theater company. “The numbers grew as positive word of mouth spread. It blossomed and we added dance classes for children and adults, and then fitness classes.”

The guiding principle, she says, was always one of inclusion. “The goal was to offer an opportunity to every child (or adult) to participate in the arts regardless of cultural, socio-economic, ethnic background or age. We happily offered unlimited scholarships.” For financial support, the theater turned to friends for donations, held fundraisers, and applied for grants.

For Howe, MST&DA’s enduring success lies in the sense of community it has fostered.

“The success of the program and the choice of many children to go on to pursue acting or the arts in another form are due to building a cohesive family together,” says Howe. “The theater provides so much more than just acting on a stage. The bonding and sense of community, the team accomplishing the resulting performances, the personal sense of pride in being a successful part of the whole ... these are some of the intangible benefits of being a part of the theater.”

A Place to Belong

For actress Eleanor Philips, who currently performs Off-Broadway, the sense of community she found at MST&DA is something she still holds dear. Philips fondly recalls how her cast-mates sprang into action when she lost a front tooth during a rehearsal for *Annie*, crawling around on their hands and knees with her to find it.

“Pursuing a career in the arts, you get to the point where you encounter the clichés of the business: the endless

auditions, the rejections, the missed opportunities,” she says. “But then you remember that, once upon a time, a bunch of kids helped you find your front tooth when you thought it was lost forever. And that sense of community is why I fell in love with theater and why I still do it as my career.”

For others, that sense of community gave them the courage to find their own voices – a skill they have continued to use, even off the stage.

Emily Goodridge describes herself as a shy child who struggled with making friends. MST&DA, she says, was a place she could be herself. As she discovered a talent for acting, her confidence grew. In turn, school gradually got better too. Today, Goodridge holds a master’s in theater education and is working on a second degree in arts administration at Florida State University. She works in the education department at the local public broadcasting



Casts from past performances at MST&DA, including *Annie* (top) and *You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown* (bottom).

station, partnering with low-income schools.

Carla Steckman likewise credits MST&DA with helping her overcome her natural shyness as a child.

“I know the moment that I was to find my confidence,” says Steckman. “I was in sixth grade and started as Rizzo in *Grease*. After I finished singing ‘There Are Worse Things I Could Do,’ I held my position during the applause and felt something transform in me. It felt wonderful. I knew I had found my passion.”

Steckman is currently writing a memoir about her youngest daughter who recently passed away from a genetic disease. She says that without her theater training, she would

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Where Are They Now?

Brooklyn resident **MARIELENA LOGSDON** is a working actor, and a recipient of the Brooklyn Film Festival’s Best Actress Award for the short film *Babyland*. ▼



JONAH BOBO studies music composition at the Music School of Ithaca College.

“MST&DA was one of the things that facilitated my love of music and musical theater and put me on the career path I’m on.”

ALISON WALTER teaches yoga, dance, and theater to people of all ages. She performs on stage and screen, and has produced two shorts and one feature film.

SIOBHAN TOWEY, a massage therapist who lives in Brooklyn, works with a performance collaborative.



◀ **SASHA DIAMOND** is an actor in New York City, currently working in theater and television.

“Nancy Howe helped me discover how to be bigger than the person I thought I was. She encouraged an excitement for theater and passion for fun that driven me throughout my career as an actor.”

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be able to be open and honest in her writing.

"Nancy Howe was transformative to my life. Without her, and the theater, I personally wouldn't have discovered my ability to reach out to, and communicate with, a wide variety of people," says Steckman. "Theater helps develop the personal self and, as a teacher, I've found that to be true for all sorts of kids – not just those interested in pursuing it professionally."

New Skills

Many former students also credit MST&DA, and the directors and teachers they worked with there, for instilling values and lessons from which they continue to draw inspiration.

Actor and filmmaker Hugo Genes attributes his comfort with public speaking and his empathy skills to his time at MST&DA. "I can't think of a better exercise in developing empathy than performing, and embodying different roles," says Genes. "These days, with so much education done in isolation on screens, the physicality, listening skills, and group work developed in the theater seem more vital than ever."

For playwright Jamie Barniker, MST&DA offered valuable tools for connecting with others despite his disability. He learned the art of being a collaborator, dealing with stage fright, and using improv for life

skills. During his time with the theater, Barniker says he came to see that little was written in theater about persons with disabilities, so he began to write. Today he is a playwright, satirist, and advocate for persons with disabilities. Barniker works as a co-producer for The Satirically Challenged Show, the first disabled satire podcast written, performed, and produced by persons with disabilities.

"Nancy [Howe] has been one of the most encouraging teachers and directors in my life," says Jed Resnick, who currently appears in the Off-Broadway production of Avenue Q. "Hers is one of the voices I carry with me in my head, checking in with her to see if

I'm making her proud."

For Howe, the feeling is mutual.

"Though it may sound hokey, my love for my former students is undiminished by time and distance. My heart fills with pride and joy at seeing the growth and success of their accomplishments," says the former director, who now lives in Los Angeles. She says she keeps up with many former students through Facebook.

"Let me say that, though I am thrilled and moved that some of the students chose the arts as a career, I am so grateful to have been a part of all of the children's lives as they grew into adults. They have given me far more than I gave them."

JOAN MARIE CUSICK is an actor and singer in New York. She also teaches teen theater at the Main Street Theatre & Dance Alliance.

"Main Street Theatre not only shaped me as an artist but as a person. I found a home at MSD&TA."



◀ **EMILY MURE** is a musician and singer-songwriter, who plays professionally and teaches private music lessons. She released her third album last fall and tours in performance across the United States and in Europe.

SAMANTHA STONE is a playwright in Harlem and an MFA student in the Fordham/Primary Stages Playwriting Program. Her work focuses on creating theater for social change, addressing topics like human trafficking and sexual slavery, chronic illness, the impact of trauma, dysfunctional families, and abusive relationships.



◀ **LEANDRA RAMM** sings with the San Francisco Symphony and San Francisco Opera Guild as well as other opera companies and orchestras.

"It was wonderful to audition, rehearse, and perform full musicals at such a young age."