

With pandemic restrictions in place, suburban youth theater programs got creative by going virtual and high-tech

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The Sarah Hall Theatre Company's Deerfield Performers Troupe rehearses for its spring production of "Matilda Jr." (Stefanie Guggenheim)

The pandemic may have diminished the number of creative outlets for children but two area theater programs found innovative ways to keep kids engaged.

[Sarah Hall Theatre Company](#) with classes in Deerfield and Glencoe used cutting-edge technology to produce filmed musicals.

“All of our programs have continued during the pandemic in various forms,” said Glencoe resident Sarah Hall, owner of Sarah Hall Theatre Company. “As soon as the country shut down, we moved all of our classes onto Zoom. At one point in mid-March, we had 35 classes per week on Zoom. Fortunately, all of my instructors and staff worked tirelessly to make it work.”

Around the summertime, they moved into a hybrid model, starting with an in-person summer camp, with a limited number of campers, that was designed to keep the kids safe.

“We had social distancing,” Hall said. “We created clear six-foot-sized boxes for our campers to remain in.”

Once masks were required, they were always worn when they couldn’t maintain social distancing. In-person singing was only done outdoors, with campers six to nine feet from each other.

For the final performance at the end of the camp, “The campers would send in vocal recordings to our sound editor and we would film them lip-syncing a song in front of a green screen,” Hall related. “Our professional editor would edit both the audio and visual portions with a background on the green screen.”

There was constant sanitizing and no sharing of costumes, props, or anything else the campers touched.

This summer, Sarah Hall Theatre Company is running their Deerfield Performers Camp, with students preparing “Legally Blonde Jr.”

“We’ve made a decision to record our show in front of a green screen outdoors to enable the students to socially distance and not wear masks,” Hall said. “I think we really have this format nailed down and it’s been very successful for us.”

Stefanie Guggenheim runs two popular programs for Sarah Hall Theatre Company: Broadway Bound, for incoming third through sixth-graders; and Deerfield Performers Troupe, an audition-only company for incoming sixth through eighth graders.

Guggenheim also teaches sixth-grade science at Shepard Middle School in Deerfield.

“We have been running our theater productions as similarly to a typical season as possible,” Guggenheim said. “However, that has resulted in filmed shows in lieu of live ones and masked rehearsals in lieu of ones filled with crazy facial expressions.” All singing rehearsals are done via Zoom and singers are recorded separately.

In the fall, Broadway Bound presented “Annie Jr.” and Deerfield Performers Troupe did “Newsies.” This Spring, Broadway Bound is working on “Seussical the Musical Jr.” and Deerfield Performers Troupe is preparing “Matilda Jr.”

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