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STAGE



JON MURRAY/PNG

Kids rehearse for Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance!, a summer musical-theatre program taking place at the Jewish Community Centre. Perry Ehrlich plays piano for a song.

Kids get up to speed on theatre magic

Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! now in its 15th year of training entertainers of the future

BY PETER BIRNIE
VANCOUVER SUN

Lots of guys are uncles by proxy. Me, for instance, to my lovely pal Shona.

Perry Ehrlich is proud father to two grown daughters, but "uncle" to hundreds of children. Heck, they must number in the thousands, with many of them now grown to adulthood, as the Richmond lawyer's love of musical theatre led him 15 years ago to found the Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! summer training program.

The halls are always alive at the Jewish Community Centre on West 41st, but the place gets positively wacky with fun when GS! GD! holds its camps in July and August. Last Friday, for instance, one group of teens was led by musical instructor Bill Sample on the song *Nine to Five*. Down

the hall and around the corner, Wendy Bross Stuart steered some younger charges in a spirited rendition of the camp's theme song (*Gotta Sing and Gotta Dance, natch*).

In the lobby of the Norman Rothstein Theatre, Ehrlich and drama instructor Chris McGregor were auditioning a circle of girls to decide what role they'll play in the end-of-term production while, in the basement dance studio, choreographer Chanz Perry put his junior hoofers through their paces.

These and more classes in other JCC nooks and crannies all come to an end at 2:30 p.m. each day so everyone can gather in the auditorium for notes from "Uncle Perry" and some practice on the show's big finale.

This year's script co-written by Ehrlich and David Hudgins is titled *Out of This World* and, as is

always the case, it's a crazy-quilt of old songs, new songs, bad puns, cheesy bridges and good — no, make that great — opportunities for the nine-to-19 cast to show off some newly acquired skills.

How newly acquired? August's classes began on the Tuesday after the B.C. Day long weekend, and by Day Four on Friday there was already ample evidence the kids were well on their way to selling a song, dancing up a storm and finessing one's shtick. And no wonder, given the credentials of the faculty — local legend Sample and renowned musicologist Stuart, choreographers Isabelle Maheux and Jason Franco joined by newcomer (but dance veteran) Perry, and up-and-coming thesp Josh Epstein, and on and on.

One of the reasons Ehrlich is able to attract all this top talent to train his kids is something he'll cheerfully admit to, a persistence

of "Perry the Pest" proportions. Wearing someone's will down like water on stone is secondary, however, to an unfailing optimism about young people and their potential for personal growth.

"I love working with young performers and seeing the difference that my faculty and I can make in their lives," says Ehrlich, "in particular as we watch their self-esteem soar as they blossom on the stage of the Norman Rothstein Theatre.

"These kids, and their parents, really nurture my life and inspire my creativity and caring." Ehrlich notes with a laugh that things have changed in 15 years. "This current crop of young performers, many of whom were not born when we first started Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance!, are generally over-indulged by their parents. They want for nothing, and are plugged into cellphones and iPods

and computers.

"On the first day, I tell them to leave all this stuff at home; I want them plugged into us."

Sun Theatre Critic
pbirnie@vancouver.sun.com

At a glance

OUT OF THIS WORLD

When: Wednesday, Aug. 25, at 7:30 p.m., Thursday, Aug. 26, at 1 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.

Where: Norman Rothstein Theatre in the Jewish Community Centre, 950 W. 41st Ave.

Tickets: \$15, call 604-257-5111

SEE VIDEO OF GOTTA SING! GOTTA DANCE! AT VANCOUVERSUN.COM