



Bob Smith
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Music Director Jack (*Grand Hotel*) Lee conducts workshops for future Broadway stars.

How To Succeed In Show Business

IT WAS MUSICAL THEATER heaven. First a song from *Where's Charley?* then a scene from *Knickerbocker Holiday*, followed by songs and scenes from *Follies*, *Wish You Were Here*, and *The Fig Leaves Are Falling*. It was Ed Linderman's *Broadway Jukebox* without the voting—you never knew what was coming next, but you reveled when it turned out to be 'bits of *Sweet Charity*, *Regina*, even something from that *Billy [Budd]* musical that ran one night decades ago. The show started at 1:00 p.m., and lasted for—get this—12 hours!

So why didn't you know about it? Because it wasn't for you, but for the performers. And while this marathon session could have been entitled *Jack Lee and Charles Kakatsakis's Broadway*, it wasn't called anything at all, because it wasn't a real show, but a presentation that showcased six weeks' work in Lee and Kakatsakis' musical theater performing classes.

Four years ago, Lee, most recently musical director of *Grand Hotel*, and Kakatsakis, a much respected private acting teacher, were discouraged at the level of performing they were seeing in Broadway musicals. They decided to do something about it, developing a

six-week intensive workshop where actors met with music man Lee and with acting coach Kakatsakis to learn songs and scenes from classic and not-so-renowned Broadway musicals.

"It's a class that focuses on musical theater acting and not on performing," Kakatsakis says, adding that "during the '60s, we saw a deterioration of the quality of acting in musicals, when the choreographer-directors emerged; as a rule, they didn't have much knowledge of acting. We've got to get back to the fact that the moment you walk on that stage, you're an actor, a person, and that's where your focus must be. Since we began, that's been the one

“As a rule, choreographer/directors don’t have much knowledge of acting.”—Charles Kakatsakis

constant.”

Most class members aren’t kids just off the turnip truck, but seasoned pros. Among this fall’s class were Victoria Clark, recently the lead in Goodspeed’s *Chocolate Soldier*; Hal Robinson and Keith Crowningshield of *Grand Hotel*; and Dorothy Stanley, probably best known as the understudy who went on for Dorothy Loudon when the star missed performances in *Annie 2*.

Nevertheless, you needn’t have appeared in a great big Broadway show to be accepted. Mark Meredith, who played Frank in the *Merrily We Roll Along* scenes—and did the character as well as any Frank we’ve seen—“is fresh from Chicago,” Lee says, “with hardly any experience. Anyone is eligible, but you must audition so we can find out who you are. First we talk with you, then we work with you around a piano to see where your sensitivities and walls are. Charlie and I have good instincts about people; we’ll know the minute you leave the room whether or not we can work with you.”

“We don’t accept or reject on the basis of type,” states Kakatsakis. “If you’re a Frank Butler and everyone else is, it doesn’t matter; we just select the people we think will benefit most.”

And the pair have seen the fruits of their labors. “It’s very rewarding to see former class members who used to be in the chorus now getting roles,” says Kakatsakis. Sometimes there are unexpected benefits: “Four classes ago,” Lee reports, “James DiPiva was scared to death of singing, but we released this glorious baritone voice. What an added confidence it gave him; now he’s doing very well as a soap star.”

While Lee and Kakatsakis would like their students to be in class each day, they aren’t surprised when they can’t be. “We schedule around

people’s problems,” Lee says pragmatically. “Colleen Fitzpatrick was doing a movie reading with Kevin Kline, and we made sure she didn’t miss that. And Dorothy Stanley was in *Me and My Girl* in Elmsford, so we made sure that during the 12-hour showcase [for which, incidentally, Lee is the sole accompanist], her scenes were on when she could do them.”

As a result, I never saw Stanley, for I didn’t stay all 12 hours—even the stagestruck have their limits—so I can’t speak for all the magic that went on, but here it is, weeks later, and I’m still remembering Steven Petrillo’s sensitive-but-not-weak Oscar in the “I’m the Bravest Individual” scene, where Denise LeDonne played “Sweet” Charity much tougher than the way we usually see her. “Yes,” Kakatsakis agrees, “we help them find the characters within themselves, so we encouraged Denise to find the Charity that was in her—more street-wise, more hooker than heart-of-gold.”

Tim Connell, who’s back from that seemingly perpetual European tour of *West Side Story* sang “The Right Girl” from *Follies*, then segued with hat-and-cane into “Buddy’s Blues”—though in his passion, he tore off his hat and flung it against the wall—only it instead flew out the open window and down onto 54th Street. (Oh, well; does anyone still wear a hat?) The 30-plus assembled in the small ATA studio laughed so hard it could have destroyed Connell’s concentration, but within split-seconds he had us again intently listening. Smiles Lee, “We prepare them for that, too.”

While there were around 20 class members in this fall’s group, “we leave open how many we take,” Lee says. The next workshop is scheduled for late spring; the cost is \$600. For further information, call (212) 362-5757. □

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