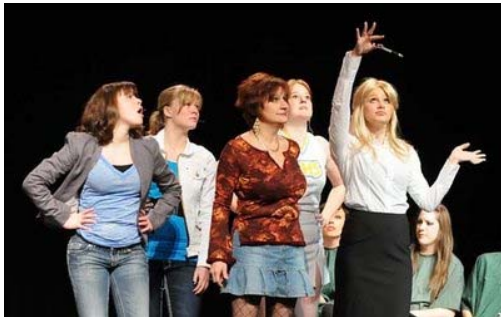


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Performers learn their craft in 'Bits'

by [Nathan Orme](#)

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An actor's first big break can make a lasting impression.

For Janet Lazarus that break came in the sixth grade. She landed a role as the lead character in the musical production of "Charlotte's Web." Friends and family already knew Lazarus from her basement and backyard performances, but this role thrust her into a new limelight.



"After that performance in school all the teachers and the principal and staff knew who I was and they'd say hello if I happened to go into the school office," Lazarus said. "That made a big impression on me. I went from being one in the crowd to someone people knew — all from being in the play. Every time I performed in a play after that, I got loads of recognition, and it

gave me an identity so to speak: 'the actress.' "

Now, after a successful acting career and as the director of Sierra School of Performing Arts (SSPA) in Reno, Lazarus is trying to give that same experience to many other young actors. This weekend is her latest effort, "Broadway Bits," which will feature the talents of 60 actors of all ages ranging from age 6 to 60.

Lazarus started the school after 12 years working in the theater Los Angeles and earning her master's in acting from UCLA. She left her career to start a family in northern Nevada. When her own son showed promise as a singer and actor, Lazarus wanted to give him a training ground so she helped found SSPA in 2005.

Lazarus said she could produce smaller shows, but with a show like "Broadway Bits" she can offer as many as 30 good roles.

This is SSPA's third production of "Broadway Bits," which features segments of the musicals "The Sound of Music," "Legally Blonde," "Into the Woods" and "Newsies." The actors must move swiftly between roles in the various bits, forcing them to learn to shift gears quickly.

"It's challenging to be able to go to a different character in a quick amount of time," said Haley Forsyth, a 16-year-old student at Galena High School who plays Elle Woods in "Legally Blonde," Milky White in "Into the Woods" and a nun in "The Sound of Music." "Usually you have one character to absorb yourself into.

Having to be versatile is a challenge.”

The four musicals are diverse: a woman leaves an Austrian convent during World War II and becomes governess to a widowed Naval officer; newsboys go on strike in New York City in the late 1800s; fairy tale characters are blended into a tale about the baker and baker's wife attempting to reverse a curse; and a spoiled ditsy blonde turns Harvard Law School on its head as she pursues her dream man in the movie turned musical.

Previous productions by SSPA of “Broadway Bits” have included the musicals “Oliver,” “Peter Pan,” “Chicago” and “Cinderella.”

Orchestrating such a complex show helps the young actors and actresses learn not just how to sing and act and move, it also helps them develop the discipline it takes to make the performance really sing.

“Above that, if they truly have passion for this it is training in the etiquette of theater,” Lazarus said. “How to do it in a social sense and professional sense. How to treat each other, how to work as a team, how to listen to a director, how to take direction. Then we get to the finer nuances of who to deliver a song in character, how you move on stage.”

Teaching the actors to move around the stage for “Broadway Bits” is Adam Whitney, a longtime dancer and choreographer whose credits include the recent “Buttercracker” for Brūka Theater and many years with “The Nutcracker” ballet in Carson City. He said he enjoys seeing young performers grow from being nondancers to getting comfortable on stage. He has seen SSPA students learn skills that they take on to other production groups.

One acting student who is getting her first break in life is 6-year-old Mya Dunlap, a student at Caughlin Ranch Elementary School. She is a triple threat with her singing, dancing and acting abilities, making her debut in several roles, including Gretl in “The Sound of Music.” She is spending a lot of time learning her lines, much to the chagrin of her 6-year-old twin brother who is annoyed by her constant practicing. But her sibling's criticism isn't stopping her from wanting to be in front of a crowd of people.

“I just like to be on stage,” she said.

“Broadway Bits” is performing Friday and Saturday and again on Feb. 11, 12 and 13. The Friday, Feb. 11 and Feb. 12 performances are at 7:30 p.m. and the Saturday and Feb. 13 performances are at 2 p.m. All performances will be at the Redfield Proscenium Theatre in the Church Fine Arts Building on the campus of the University of Nevada, Reno. Tickets cost \$16 for adults, \$12 for students and seniors (age 65 and older) in advance or \$20 for adults and \$15 for students and seniors at the door. To buy tickets call 852-7740 or visit www.sierraschoolofperformingarts.org.