

From the cradle to the stage

Hundreds of children are taking centre stage in British theatres. Are they being pushed too far into the spotlight? By Caroline Scott.
Photographs: Lydia Goldblatt

PRIVATE



Scarlett Embleton, age 11 (far left) plays Debbie in *Billy Elliot*. She says the things she misses most are hugs from her mum back home in Newcastle

Shaun Malone, age 13 (left) plays Michael in *Billy Elliot*. The production employs a pool of 40 chaperones, plus tap, voice and ballet teachers to work with each of its young cast

Every week night, and twice on Wednesdays and Saturdays, the stage of the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, one of the biggest in London, is filled with children. As the curtain goes up on Rupert Goold's *Oliver!*, 50 boys, their faces smeared with grease and soot, sit at three long tables, while behind them loom the towering brick walls and broken windows of the workhouse. Anthony Ward's vast set dips and snakes against a Dickensian London skyline; a bridge, accessed by two steel staircases, traverses the stage from one side to the other, and boys pour over the bridges and through a *passerelle* that runs across the orchestra pit. The potential for breaching health-and-safety regulations seems limitless.

Theatre is a notoriously precious environment at the best of times, but on this production tension ricochets down the phone line. "I'm sorry, I've not had my coffee..." says the associate choreographer, Geoffrey Garratt, who is trying to explain the particular challenges of working with a total of 132 boys aged from 7 to 15, while in the background a coach >>>>

disgorges a load of them onto the street outside. The boys are organised into three gangs of 34 and two of 16: Tanners, Shillings, Farthings, Micawbers and Wickfords work through the week on rotation, while a backstage crew of six chaperones is crammed into four dressing rooms, each with wide-screen TV, computer and board games. Anyone who has tried getting small boys organised in the morning might wonder how on earth this is going to work. I'm imagining half the workhouse paralysed in front of the TV an hour before curtain up, each with one sock on, having lost a vital bit of costume.

Some of the boys have never set foot on a stage before, and Garratt admits there's been a fair degree of competitive rehearsing. "Come on Micawbers, the Farthings' routines are much tighter than yours... Some respond better than others. If they get wobbly lipped, I don't push it." The casting director, Jo Hawes, has sat in on many of the rehearsals, partly because she can't keep away — her nine-year-old, Matthew, is one of the workhouse children — but mainly to keep an eye on the boys. "Particularly the difficult ones..."

The West End is ringing with the sound of children. Sylvia Young, the highly respected doyenne of child performers, reports a huge increase in demand for children through her Young'uns agency. "Theatre isn't financially rewarding, but it's what it's all about, isn't it? It really is still only the odd child who gets into a big film."

"Physically, it's very hard for children to get into these productions," says Hawes, "and the work is extremely tough. But once they're in, they never want to leave." Hawes, who has cast children in more than 70 shows over the past 14 years, begins by contacting around 150 children's agencies within the M25. "It's easy to find children, far less easy to find outstanding ones. About a third of the boys have done stuff for me before, the rest are new, and, long in the tooth as I am, I still find that exciting."

There are strict rules for children in West End productions; they must be no more than 5ft tall (a measuring stick is used at all castings), undeveloped and with unbroken voices. The majority are not well paid — the basic fee is around £25 per performance and is not negotiable. That's the children. But spare a thought for the parents who, having survived five rounds of auditions, are only too willing to put their own lives on hold to support their offspring. Certainly there seems very little in the way of glory for them since they never get past the stage door. Some mutter darkly about finding the whole business pretty galling. "Theatre is not an adventure playground," says Hawes firmly. "We don't want 50 parents backstage fussing."

The 10 Oliver! children who live the furthest away are living with chaperones in the Oliver! flat in London. Gang members are coached in



every night from Windsor and Maidenhead for the opening number, and out again afterwards. Parents of the others will spend their evenings over the next six months sitting in their cars on yellow lines or trotting up and down the Charing Cross Road to Borders, which mercifully stays open until 11pm.

Seven-year-old Alix Gilbert has clocked up 82 performances in the Joseph children's choir at the Adelphi Theatre, and her nine-year-old sister, Christie, 160. Alix has just won the prestigious role of Eponine in *Les Misérables*. Her father, Jay, a self-employed accountant, spends much of his time ferrying her to and from rehearsals. "You need to be able to support the kids, not just financially but also with time. We live an hour and a half away, and rehearsals four times a week in town have been tough. It isn't my love of it that keeps me going, it's hers."

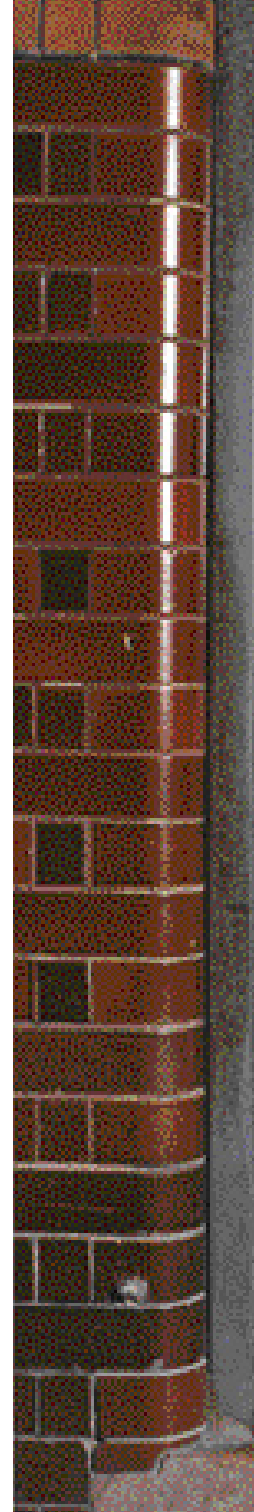
Indulging children's passion for performing is a lucrative business. Sylvia Young reckons that if she opened her doors to all the children who want to attend her Saturday school, she'd be a millionaire. Stagecoach, which has 615 franchises and close to 41,000 students, reports a 10% increase in applications; Razzamataz, with 26 schools nationwide, is launching six more in 2009. And there is a plethora of others across the country with names like Theatre4Kids, Stage Door, The Big Act, Born2Perform and — my personal favourite — The Angie Le Mar School of Expression, which provides "media-related and performance training for children aged four upwards..." And if you think four is leaving it a bit

Lilli Macleary, age 9 (above) recently played Marta in *The Sound of Music*. 'I miss it so much,' she says. 'I'm hoping to go back'

Tom Holland, age 13 (right, standing top left, with Scarlet and Shaun) plays Billy Eliot. 'Before a performance, my stomach gets all fluttery'

late, there are thousands of thriving musical-theatre workshops for babies and toddlers all boasting growing businesses, because however hard the recession bites, we would rather go without socks than thwart our children's desire to express themselves.

Recently, I sat through a performance of the musical *Blood Brothers* with a gaggle of 12-year-olds. Two were signed up to the colossally expensive West End Stage summer school — the runner-up of *I'd Do Anything*, Jessie Buckley, is a former pupil — now in its third year. Around 200 children come from all over the world, some having saved the £445 tuition fees themselves. For this they get a week of professional masterclasses and a chance to perform at Her Majesty's Theatre. "There is a difference between chasing fame and wanting a career," says its principal tartly. "Our students are 100% dedicated to the work, the classes and the craft."





“The problem is, we now have a generation of tiny people who have grown up with TV talent shows, so the interest in performing is greater, but the capability is not,” she says. “As with adults, you tend to pick the ones who are mature and well behaved, and who you know won’t buckle under pressure. I’d been in two minds about kids in theatre before *Fiddler*. But in both shows I’ve watched them blossom and gain a sense of composure that has been breathtaking.”

Tarquín Shaw-Young is the head of casting at the Stagecoach Agency, the largest young performers’ agency, with more than 2,000 children on its books. How does he find them? “They find me...” he says wearily. “I’ll put a casting notice up on our website and within 10 seconds a parent will be on the phone. I’m sure they’ve got their BlackBerries linked to the site.”

He gestures to the stack of Spotlight casting directories next to his desk. “Years ago, there were a few children at the back of the adults’ sections. Now they have their own directory, and 2009 is half an inch thicker than 2008. This industry does attract very pushy parents. If I see parents berating kids because they haven’t done well in an audition, I will say something, because that to me is a kind of child abuse.”

Child performers under 16 have to have a licence, issued by their local education authority, to allow them to work, whether it’s a one-hour voice-over or a six-month West End run. They need a letter from their head teacher and a medical declaration from a doctor. Unlike child models, who have six-month open licences, there is no such thing for actors, a contentious issue for agents who would like the process simplified. But it strikes me as not unreasonable to question in the first place the wisdom of propelling children into a profession in which rejection and pain is almost inevitable. Out of 100 child actors, maybe one will make it as an adult. And the end, when it comes, is brutal. “Children change,” says Shaw-Young. “They look very cute one year, then, suddenly, they don’t.”

In the children’s dressing rooms at the London Palladium, racks of crepe-soled Start Rite sandals hover below the von Trapp siblings’ costumes, and there are vast jars of Liquorice Allsorts – first-night presents – and tins of Celebrations. Three-thousand children queued for the initial auditions in 2006; 18 were finally chosen. It’s rumoured that when the measuring stick went up and down the road, parents nudged their children off the kerb to get past the height rule. James Meaden, 13 (Fredrich), appears to have flouted it; his size 8½ sandals had to be specially made. The newest of them all – Richard Linnell (Kurt) and Yasmin Garrad, (Brigitta), both 12, have been in the show before in different roles – is so excited he can barely contain himself. “I’ve grown!” he yelps. ➤➤➤

“We’ve had children audition who see it as a way to instant stardom.

But children in these shows often work 13-hour days’

If there were such things as musical-theatre workshops for toddlers when I was growing up, my parents had never heard of them. And if they had, they’d have considered them recklessly indulgent. Mostly we were left to think up our own entertainment, and I’ve felt similarly averse to organising the free time of my own four. But my all-singing, all-dancing 11-year-old’s fixation with everything theatrical has meant I’ve had organisation thrust upon me. Indie now does hours of drama and dance on a Saturday, with ballet, voice and music during the week. Fuelled, I’m certain, by having had her nose pressed to the screen throughout the BBC’s talent-search shows

How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?, Any Dream Will Do, and now I’d Do Anything, not to mention the knock-on effect of the phenomenally successful film *High School Musical*. It’s what Frank Thompson, the resident children’s director of *The Sound of Music*, calls the “X-Factor syndrome”. “I’d be lying if I said it doesn’t affect us. We’ve had children audition who see it as a way to instant stardom. But when you add in school and the travelling, children in these shows often work 13-hour days.”

Kim Poster, who produced *Fiddler on the Roof*, and now *Carousel* at the Savoy, auditioned around 200 youngsters for a handful of parts.

Rehearsals for

Oliver! (right). The cast includes 132 boys, aged from 7 to 15

India Burton,
age 11 (below) with her mum, the *Sunday Times* writer Caroline Scott

The children do their vocal warm-up around a piano, and their musical director, Ros Jones, is remorselessly tough: "Yasmin, make sure you listen to the orchestra!"; "Chloe, is that the sweetest we can do?" The sound is so beautiful that by the time they've finished *The Hills are Alive*, I'm feeling quite weepy.

David Russell, a children's chaperone for more than 20 years, says that the *Sound of Music* parents have built a community among themselves, the first time he's seen it happen. They have barbecues in the summer, and all the actors come along. Christine Macleary's daughter, Lilli, 9, has just finished playing Marta. "The auditions were gruesome, but she's loved every moment. She's an only child and her stage family became like brothers and sisters."

Lilli has only been out of the show a week, but it's clear her heart is still at the theatre. "I miss it so much. I'm hoping to go back," she says. Her mother, thinking of all the waiting and late-night driving, makes wild hand signals behind her: "No, no, no!" Later she sends me an e-mail: "It's funny, but it's a very beguiling world. You resist, but you get sucked in."

Carmel Thomas, the musical director of the Joseph choir, is auditioning for new members. Indie is desperate to try. She's given a slot and asked to prepare the first four lines of *Somewhere over the Rainbow*. On the long schlep out to Essex, I remind her of her last brush with rejection when she was passed over for the much-coveted role of Nancy in the year-six production of *Oliver!* She cried for three hours and slept in her school uniform. She goes in with four others and comes out waving a green slip. Ah. A recall. I'm already thinking: "Rehearsals in Essex. After school. Probably have to drag her little brothers with her." She beams all the way home feeling the piece of paper in her pocket. I see that we are already in up to our necks and there may be no turning back.

At Billy Elliot, I stand in the wings, where thrillingly I am almost flattened by roaring miners and shifting scenery. I am captivated both by the extraordinary talent of the children and the sheer otherworldliness of it all. And this is when I get it. Theatre is an escape from normal life for children, just as it is for adults. You get to play at being someone else in a world where everyone treats you as an equal. It was *Billy*, which has played to 2.6m since its premiere in 2005, that transformed the notion of the child actor.



"We'd have preferred him to do something less poofy. We said, 'Okay, but no tights.' But the memories are wonderful — we feel really lucky"

"Billy is all about the children," says the casting director, Jessica Ronane. "If the kids aren't happy and cared for, we don't really have a show."

The production now employs a pool of 40 chaperones, plus tap, voice and ballet teachers. Four boys are training in Newcastle and three in London, then there are the 13 children living at the Billy house in west London who each have individual "maintenance regimes". Ronane worked from a database containing every dance school in England to find the first three Billys: Liam Mower, James Lomas and George Maguire. Liam's mum, Jo, had three rugby-mad boys and one who, bafflingly, wasn't. "When he said he wanted to go to dance class, we didn't really want him to. We'd have preferred him to do something less poofy. In the end we went along with it, but we said, 'Okay, but no ballet tights. Wear your tracky bottoms.'"

Liam's dance teacher put him forward for the auditions. "When they rang to say he'd got the part, me and his dad felt numb. We sat in the garden going, 'What is the matter with us?'" Liam was involved in the production for almost four years. Now 16, he is training with the Rambert School of Dance. "There were times when I felt I couldn't cope," says Jo, "but the memories are

wonderful. We're an ordinary family from a council estate — we feel really lucky."

There have been 20 Billys and 132 ballet girls over the past four years; the Broadway production has got around the problem of children's licensing by casting adult ballet girls who look like children. One is 18, another 27 — but I can't help feeling this isn't quite right. No adult could ever reproduce the gloriously plonky gait of a true regional dance-school child. One child's father brings her up from Portsmouth, one comes from Brighton, a couple from Essex.

"That's nothing," they roar. "We've got girls from Swindon..." Which means that when the curtain comes down at 10.30pm, the parents have a good two-hour drive through central London and down the M4. Then they're back two days later for the matinée.

Scarlet Embleton, 11, who plays Debbie in *Billy Elliot*, conducts our interview lying on the floor of the theatre's games-strewn children's room. The things she misses most, she says, are cuddles from her mum back in Newcastle. As if on cue, the cast's two grannies float in in their nighties and whisk a couple of children onto their knees. Tom Holland, a tiny 13-year-old who gives the most heartbreaking performance as Billy, is the only one who admits to suffering from nerves. "Before a performance, my stomach gets fluttery

and I feel sick," he says. "And it's so tiring!" Have you anything to say to the *Oliver!* boys? "It's the most fun you'll ever have in your life," they shriek.

There seems to be an entire auditorium full of children at the Joseph recall this Sunday morning. One child is wearing jazz shoes and a sweatshirt that says Talents Theatre School. Everyone seems a lot more tense than last time and they eye each other edgily. After nearly two hours, Indie comes out looking a bit grey. An entire bank of 4x4s is parked up outside and I imagine that they've got sandwiches and coffee in there. I've been sloshing around in the pouring rain and I'm thinking I probably haven't got the kind of stamina and commitment it takes to be a stage parent anyway.

Two days later, Indie gets an e-mail. "So sorry," Carmel writes. "We hadn't noticed you were so tall..." Gah! At 5ft 1½in, the child's career is over before it's begun. Indie, furious with me for passing on tall genes, says she feels like cutting off her legs. But half an hour later she's over it. "It's okay," she says. "I had the best time anyway..." And that, I suppose, is what really matters ■

Oliver! is now at London's Theatre Royal Drury Lane; www.oliverthemusical.com