

The Story of iTheatrics

Plot Summary: iTheatrics' staff has played an important role in the creation of the educational musical theater market. In a few years, the new company has been established as one of the leading creative consultants in the field. iTheatrics has designed imaginative and original educational experiences for a distinguished list of clients including the Jim Henson Company, leading theatrical licensor Music Theatre International (MTI), Disney Theatricals, MacMillan/McGraw-Hill publishing, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and the New York City Department of Education. Ultimately iTheatrics works to make the world a better place by giving young people everywhere the opportunity to create magic on stage.

ACT I: In 1997, iTheatrics founder and chairman Timothy A. McDonald was recruited by MTI CEO Freddie Gershon to create and develop the first educational division in a major musical theater licensing firm. MTI shared the concern of its musical theater authors that the next generation of theater-goers was being lost to budget cuts and video games. Students were losing the opportunity to learn important life skills – like communication and collaboration – through the process of putting on a show.

MTI Education's mission was to empower teachers and performing arts centers to create more arts opportunities for kids. Tim got to work collaborating with authors to create MTI's Broadway Junior titles for middle school performers. Broadway Junior musicals are 60-minute versions of classic shows, adjusted to the vocal ranges of student performers. Even more importantly, each Broadway Junior title comes with a "ShowKit" of corresponding materials making it possible for any educator – whether it be the drama teacher, the sports coach or the math teacher – to successfully launch an all-school musical. Each ShowKit includes a show-specific director's guide, producer's guide, teaching plans tying the show into the school curriculum, an orchestrated CD for performance, a choreography DVD and a rehearsal CD breaking down the various singing parts.

In 1995, MTI selected teacher Cynthia Ripley (now the lead educational consultant for iTheatrics) to pilot a production of *Annie Junior*, the first-ever title for MTI's new theater for schools division. Cindy created the first ever Director's Guide and musical theater was on its way to schools.

The Broadway Junior Collection was a smash-hit with schools and performing arts groups nationwide. Many first time directors admitted they had found the idea of staging a musical intimidating, until the guides led them "step by step" through the process of producing a show. Furthermore, each production allowed kids to be seen in a new light by their families, teachers and friends and further mobilized community leaders and educators to create more arts opportunities for kids.

Tim's department expanded, and Steven Kennedy, now iTheatrics' resident choreographer, joined the team. For ten years, Tim and his team worked side-by-side with theatrical greats (including Stephen Sondheim, Arthur Laurents, Stephen Flaherty, Lynn Ahrens, Stephen Schwartz and Sheldon Harnick) to create age-appropriate versions of classic musicals – such as *Annie*, *Meredith Willson's The Music Man* and *Into the Woods* – for students to perform, along with corresponding educational materials.

MTI Education expanded its division to include “School Edition” musicals and materials for high school students. The company worked with Cameron Mackintosh on a high school edition of *Les Misérables*, which, according to *Dramatics Magazine*, was the number one produced musical in high schools in 2003. Tim and his team went on to create other School Edition titles including *Aida*, *Ragtime* and *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.

Tim and his team also partnered with Disney Theatricals to adapt eight beloved Disney animation titles – including *Aladdin*, *101 Dalmatians*, *The Jungle Book*, *Cinderella* and *Mulan* – for the stage. In doing so, they virtually created the “direct to licensing” musical theater market. The company began developing 30 minute shows for the elementary school market. Marty Johnson, now iTheatrics' Artistic Director, joined the MTI team.

MTI Education formed an innovative partnership with the MacMillan/McGraw-Hill company which allowed musical theater, usually an after-school activity, to become part of the core curriculum. The MacMillan/McGraw-Hill “Spotlight on Music” textbook included “bite size” Broadway musicals and performance rights with accompanying resources allowing students at more than 60,000 schools nation-wide to perform shows in schools.

Tim and his team also looked for innovative ways to encourage students and teachers in the arts. In 2003, MTI partnered with Atlanta's Theater of the Stars to present the first-ever Junior Theater Festival which drew together thousands of students, teachers and theater professionals to celebrate students' on-stage and backstage work. Today, the Junior Theater Festival is the largest international festival dedicated to groups who present musicals with elementary and middle school aged performers.

Guided by the principle that education has very little to do with age, Tim's department reached out to educators. MTI Education created professional development seminars for teachers, walking them step-by-step through the process of presenting a show. MTI Education also traveled across the U.S. to give music theater presentations to leading educational organizations including the Music Educators National Conference, the National Alliance of Elementary School Principals, the National PTA and the National Alliance of Music Theater.

By the time Tim left to form iTheatrics (with Gershon's blessing), MTI Education's musicals for all ages had set the standard for educational licensing in the industry. The company was celebrating the fact that over two million young people had been part of a MTI Education production.

ACT II: iTheatrics continues to work with MTI and Disney Theatrical Productions in the adaptation of shows for educational markets, and the creation, design and layout of theater resources for teachers. In its New York City laboratory, the iTheatrics team has developed *Rent School Edition*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie Junior*, *A Year With Frog and Toad KIDS* and Roald Dahl's *Willy Wonka Junior* for MTI Education. iTheatrics is also developing several well-known children's literature properties into musicals. The first of these titles *The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley* based on the book *Flat Stanley* by Jeff Brown, is on a national tour across the U.S.

Tim saw an opportunity to raise the bar of theater presented to young audiences at performing arts centers across the country. In partnership with Stephen Gabriel at IntraMusic Theatricals, iTheatrics directed and developed four new touring shows, *Broadway Junior on Tour*, *Disney's Discover Theater*, *The Musical Adventures of Flat Stanley* and *Frankly Ben*. The tours allow local theaters to connect with young audiences and inspire teachers and students to present their own musical productions and continue to frequent other community artistic events.

New projects include the creation of *Roald Dahl's James and the Giant Peach* and *Jim Henson's Emmet Otter's Jug-Band Christmas*.

iTheatrics Junior Teaching Intensives offer professional development opportunities for teachers. In a small, fun environment, groups of educators hone their directing skills through interactive, hands-on activities. All elements of musical theatre production are addressed including casting, staging, and choreography, rehearsal techniques and various technical aspects.

The company works with the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), MTI and the Shubert Foundation on a landmark musical theater mentorship program, which facilitates educators at New York City public schools to build a self-sustaining musical theater program in their schools within two years. Teachers from selected schools attend four intensive iTheatrics Professional Development workshops, which are accredited by the NYCDOE and fulfill the annual professional development requirements for NYCDOE teachers.

iTheatrics continues to use the transformative power of the arts to make the world a better place for children and theater. All of iTheatrics' endeavors are designed to celebrate, inspire, and ignite the imagination and lead to theater performances by young people everywhere.