

Theatrical Accessibility and Inclusion at the Paper Mill Playhouse

By Leslie Fanelli and Sean Dineen

Paper Mill Playhouse, located in Millburn, New Jersey, is a flagship, role-model theater for the whole country. It has won a multitude of awards for accessibility, inclusive of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts Excellence in Accessibility Award; the American Council of the Blind/Audio Description Award for Achievement in Performing Arts; and The Cultural Access Network Innovator Award, to name but a few honors. Other theaters throughout the country (and the world) are well served to follow Paper Mill's lead. Indeed, the playhouse has a long-standing reputation for productions that are extraordinary, dazzling, and inclusive. Its mission is to enrich, entertain, and inspire its audiences and onsite Theatre School students as the nation's premier musical theater. Paper Mill Playhouse fosters a creative environment for advancing the art form, educating students, and developing future theater lovers, while providing access for all.

The theater has an extensive program of award-winning community services in order to welcome people with and without disabilities: barrier-free access; open-captioned performances; sign-interpreted performances; wheelchair seating; audio description and sensory seminars; Braille and large-print programs; autism/sensory-friendly performances for children and adults; and an infra-red listening system available to audience members with hearing loss. Tickets for patrons benefiting from these Access Services and one guest are available at a discounted rate. For important details about the entirety of the aforementioned services, please visit the

Paper Mill Playhouse website, specifically this page:

<http://www.papermill.org/about-us/audience-info/accessibility-info.html>. You can also call Derek Alfano at 973-315-1676.

Furthermore, Paper Mill Playhouse has a class called *Theatre for Everyone*, which has been featured in *The New York Times* and *BroadwayWorld.com*. The class was the creative brainchild of the late Mickey McNany, beloved founder of the Theatre School. Her granddaughter, who has Down syndrome, was the creative motivation for the class. Several years ago, Mickey's granddaughter asked for a theater party for her birthday. It absolutely flourished- happily attended by children with and without disabilities, and afterward, the parents asked if it would be possible to have more theater productions like that. Soon thereafter, Mickey and the Paper Mill Director of Education, Lisa Cooney, decided to move forward with the class. It came to fruition as a collaboration with VSA New Jersey, an organization which provides a wide array of arts programming for children and adults with all types of disabilities and abilities. *Theatre for Everyone* is class for young people with disabilities, ages 7 to 18+ years old, as well as their typical siblings, parents and other caregivers. The class includes improvisation, storytelling, music, movement, mime, and some visual art. The series creatively embraces diverse learning styles and modes of communication. The course always ends with a fun *Sharing* for invited, extended family and friends. We, the authors, are the propitious teachers of this exciting class! We instill in everyone a joyous theatricality and awareness of Disability Pride- for people with and without disabilities. To register for this or any other class at Paper Mill Playhouse, please call Michelle Tempkin at 973-315-1666.

Here is a representative parent comment: "Theatre for Everyone is a magical class! It is filled with positive energy and a spirit of joy and acceptance that we've never found in any other activity. Leslie and Sean have a gift to reach children of all different abilities, and encourage them to work together to perform and engage at a level that is truly remarkable."

Educator and Disability Advocate, Ina White, adds: "Because of misinformation or ignorance, too many people underestimate the interests and abilities of people with autism and other developmental disabilities. Given a chance, they constantly surprise people, and, in the process, both they and the people around them grow."

In addition, Paper Mill's renowned Theatre School offers several other inclusive programs. Children's Theatre on Tour, comprised of young people ages 13 to 17, as well as the Junior All Stars, comprised of children ages 10 . 12, are touring performance classes that present their productions at community centers, hospitals, and schools. For another program, these Paper Mill students pre-record voices for musical plays for nonverbal students, who utilize augmentative communication, in performances at The Horizon Elementary School in Livingston for the "Lend Your Voice" Program.

Moreover, there are other theater classes for all levels of students with and without disabilities, beginner to advanced, ages pre-K through senior citizen. Everyone is welcome.

One in five Americans has a disability, so, naturally, the performers, crew, and other staff are a happy cornucopia of people with and without disabilities.

Paper Mill\$ celebrated mainstage productions include the Access Services. Memorable performances have featured *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* with music by award-winning, Broadway composers Alan Menken and Stephen Schwartz and *The Bandstand* by the Broadway team of Richard Oberacker and Robert Taylor. Upcoming in February and March 2016 will be the world premiere of *A Bronx Tale*, an explosive new musical written by Chazz Palminteri. It will be directed by the formidable team of Robert De Niro and Jerry Zacks.

Quite literally: Come one, come all!