

Herald-Tribune

Broadway veteran brings arts alive for young audiences at Van Wezel hall

Jay Handelman, Sarasota Herald-Tribune

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Justin Gumlak had quite the career going as a Broadway dancer, appearing in eight major musicals, including “The Producers,” “Shrek the Musical,” “Annie Get Your Gun,” “Anything Goes” and “The Mystery of Edwin Drood,” along with tours and regional productions.

He performed under his stage name Justin Greer. By the time he retired from Broadway in 2014, he had already launched a side career as an educator, working as a teaching artist in different schools in New York City.

He earned a master’s in educational leadership, politics and advocacy at New York University and now spends his days helping young students and adults better connect with the arts as director of education and community engagement of the [Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall](#).



He said his job gives him a chance to be creative and inspire people.

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“My career as a Broadway dancer was amazing and I’m so grateful that I had it,” he said during a conversation in his Van Wezel office. “But when you are in a show you are recreating someone else’s creative vision over and over and over again, and that re-creation is part of the art form. When you’re a teacher, though, it’s all your ideas, your creative energy and your delivery of your work, influencing young kids.”

Anyone who has met a dancer or seen “A Chorus Line” knows there’s a point when dancers have to move on to something else.



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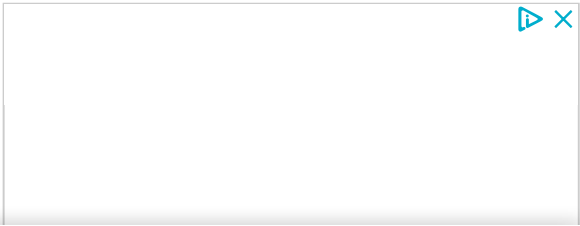
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“There’s a time when you’re acting and dancing and your body just can’t do it,” he said. “A Broadway performer is an athlete and an artist and you really have to be razor-sharp focused. You can’t do anything else. It’s all



with what I did and how I did it.”

He began teaching at what he describes as a “fancy schmancy” school that liked the idea he was a Broadway veteran. He was given a chance to create an arts-integrated dance-theater program.

“It was a complete gift,” he recalls. “I was so lucky to be given that experience. I went right into the classroom and was there for about 10 years. I developed this really robust program for this private school and I loved it.”



A pandemic readjustment

But then COVID hit. He and his husband, Craig Byers, a graphic designer, had a home they bought in 2019 in Sarasota, where Gomlak had been a snowbird for 20 years. They began discussing how they could change their lives for a permanent move.

“We came up with an exit strategy to relocate here. Part of that was me finding another kind of job,” Gomlak said.

His master’s degree was geared to help him work with communities or organizations that would need an education director. “There’s a wide application for this degree and I cast a wide net to see what opportunities there were,” he said.

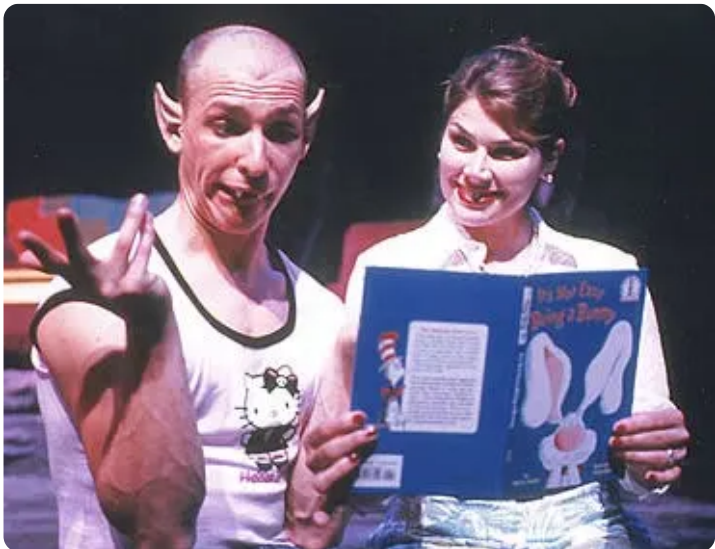
Among them was his current job, previously held by Kelli Maldonado, who moved to a new but similar position with the Sarasota Performing Arts Foundation.

The Foundation funds the hall’s educational programs and operates its own, even as leaders are working to raise funds for a new performing arts hall.

“In one way you can think of the Foundation as funding the programming that happens here, but the Foundation also has programming of its own, so we’re not doing the same sorts of activities with the same sorts of populations. We’re trying, between the two organizations, to hit a wide variety of folks for whom our services could be very enlightening,” he said.



art. Art is for everyone and some of the people who need it the most don't believe this place is for them."



A multi-faceted job teaching arts

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Gomlak said there are three aspects (or what he calls buckets) to his job. He oversees a series of children's theater shows at the Van Wezel for students in Sarasota, Manatee, Charlotte and DeSoto counties. "In many cases, ours is the first experience the kids have in a live theater." With his colleagues, he creates modules for lesson plans to help teachers integrate the theater experiences into their overall curriculum.

"We want to make sure that we're allowing teachers to hit things from literacy, science or math," he said.

This season, schooltime performances include "Dot Dot Dot," Jean Michel and the Be Bop Kings and "Stinky Cheese Man." In a collaboration with Ruth Eckerd Hall in Clearwater it also will present REVolutions Dance Company, a Tampa-based ensemble that features seated and standing dancers. The program will focus on disability and the arts.

Gomlak also coordinates a large number of teaching artists – visual artists, actors, dancers and others who are trained to use their art forms as part of school curricula. They do small residencies or stand-alone workshops in different schools, with a focus on students' literacy skills.

"When I was working in classrooms, I would try to sneak all the good learning into a fun lesson," he said. "We want to try to trick kids into learning something fabulous. Sometimes school is hard, and arts often speak to those students who struggle in the traditional learning environment."

The services are often offered free to schools and Gomlak works with arts coordinators in the public school systems.

The third bucket is community engagement, which can involve providing free tickets to a mainstage show, master classes, working with senior centers, discussions and other programs to bring the arts out into the community.

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Teaching Broadway dances to students and adults

He uses his stage background to lead a series of master classes for adults, teens and children, tied to the touring Broadway shows coming to Sarasota, including “Hamilton,” “Hadestown” and “Shrek.” The sessions are \$30 per class or four for \$100.

“It’s an opportunity for our audience to experience the artistry and work that goes into the art they see on stage. We make it seem so eas on stage, so when someone is put into the shoes of an actor or dancer and has to learn a dance combination to a musical, they realize it’s not easy. My hope is that when they come to see the show they look at it with a new appreciation.”

In his first season, his classes attracted primarily retired women who were available during the day. “It’s hard to get to teenagers because they have a lot going on. It’s a specific kind of kid who will come to my class.” There are two master classes for “Hamilton” for teenagers and one for “Shrek.”

In June, he also led the hall’s first technical theater summer camp for kids ages 12 to 18. It focused on teaching participants about backstage theater crafts, including lighting, sound, wardrobe, hair, makeup and carpentry, and called on the resources of members of the IATSE stagehands union local #412.

Some of the artists, particularly dance companies, also will present their own master classes when they perform at the hall, and others will take part in talk backs after or before a performance that Gomlak will moderate.

“We try to reach out to as many kids as possible in as many ways as we can,” he said. “You just never know which kid is going to react in a magical way to a live performance.”

He loved performing, but “there’s so much more impact for me as a teacher and now as an administrator of folks who do that teaching. It’s so much more creative energy than there ever was as someone working on the top levels of my career. This work has so much more impact on young minds and ultimately kids' minds are so malleable. That’s where you want to get them: when they’re young. I am not trying to make my students

appreciators, where are we going?”

To learn more about the Van Wezel education and engagement programs:
vanwezel.org/education

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