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Justin Gomlak engages students during a class at the Van Wezel.

From Broadway to Sarasota: Justin Gomlak takes the stage as the Van Wezel's education director

BY MICHELLE VALKOV
Town Chronicle Correspondent

Justin Gomlak has been director of Education and Community Engagement at the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall for only about 18 months — and already he's making an impact with his unique programs and innovations.

"It's a gift, because this is a vibrant education engagement program and it was already very vibrant," he said. "And when I took it over, I get to take that already excellent foundation and move it even further forward in service of our community service members and our patrons."

The director, who transferred from New York, also brings one outstanding advantage to his position: Broadway experience.

"Before I worked here, for about a decade I was at a fancy-shmancy private school in Manhattan. I taught theater and dance to elementary students there — and, before that, I was a Broadway actor.

"At the beginning of my career, I did nine Broadway shows throughout the course of 15 years, which were musicals. While I was there and acting, I was developing a parallel career as an educator, and when it came time for me, essentially, to retire from the stage, I was able to transition pretty smoothly into the classroom."

While Gomlak was teaching, he got his master's degree in educational leadership from New York University, living his life in the Big Apple.

Then COVID struck.

Gomlak spent the first part of the pandemic down in Sarasota.

"I realized that it's pretty awesome here and decided to transition down here full time. I feel so lucky to have landed here because, here in this commercial theater, I get to kind of use my Broadway commercial theater experience ... combined with my education experience. And so, this job is a combination of my life's pursuits."

He thinks of his job as having three parts: a program series for children's theater, working with a staff of teaching artists that are well versed in arts integration, and finding ways to engage the community.

Engaging everyone

Gomlak explains arts integration as fundamentally using the art form to help curricular learning — math, reading, social studies and, sometimes, science.

"But it's an art-centered lesson and the learning goals are, actually, oftentimes rein-

forcing the things that kids are learning in school. For me, it's a win-win: They get arts, and they get the reinforcement of these important skills that they are being tested on."

Gomlak's community engagement piece also focuses on partnering with senior centers, organizations

that serve the previously unhoused, people with disabilities and others.

In late January, Gomlak offered an Arts and Disability week: The Van Wezel partnered with Clearwater's Ruth Eckerd Hall to produce a schooltime performance of a Tampa Bay physically integrated dance company, which featured both disabled and non-disabled dancers. They filled the audience with kids with disabilities.

"We provide programming, free tickets and tours of our amazing Van Wezel building," Gomlak said.

To help support the show, Gomlak and his coworkers held some dance workshops at the local Oak Park School, which is a school that primarily deals with disabilities, and the experience was truly transformative.

"There are many companies across the country but none of them have a show that is specifically designed for school-age children to learn and see what they are doing on stage. It's incredibly inspirational to watch the collaboration and the camaraderie between these dancers and the beautiful movement that they create together," Gomlak said.

He noted that the kids were stoked to experience the interactive show, being disabled themselves and watching someone else with a disability perform onstage as a featured artist.

Gomlak said he was proud, not just because of the positive feedback about Arts and Disability Week he received from Wilkinson Elementary and Oak Park schools, but also because he was able to demonstrate to the disabled community that the Van Wezel is a place of access and accessibility.

"I'm really proud that we created something new, that never existed," he added. "We are going to continue this work and continue these conversations."

But there's more to his position than just reaching out. One thing he has created — that he enjoys particularly — is his Masterclass Series.

Behind-the-scenes education

Gomlak designed the Masterclass



GOMLAK

Series for Van Wezel's patrons. He runs the program himself — teaching dancing, singing and stage acting.

The title of each Masterclass is the name of the corresponding show at the Van Wezel, and the class revolves around the story and characters.

"I use the shows that are coming as part of our Broadway series and use those as inspiration to create dance classes that will allow our patrons — which many are retired ladies. I will admit to that demographic," Gumlak quipped.

"When we, professional actors, make stuff look effortless, everything is carefully choreographed and we all know what's going on, and it doesn't look like it's even hard work oftentimes and, meanwhile, the work that goes into creating it, is huge."

The classes give patrons a window into the world of a working actor — and how much care and thought and rehearsal goes into just even a minute.

"For me it's a way for me to share my vast experience as a retired performer, in service of bringing joy and fun to the class participants and really delivering a message of access."

Classes are held in the Education Room of the Van Wezel. The cost is \$30 per class or \$100 for a package of four classes, and space is limited.

One challenge Gumlak said he faces is finding a niche for a program that doesn't already exist in the Sarasota community.

"There's so much that's good and there's no reason for me to offer what someone else is already doing well here. This is a community that is so full of amazing arts organizations, and one thing that is done very well here — in multiple arts organizations — is excellent performance-based summer camps, and I'm



COURTESY IMAGE

Justin Gumlak teaches a dance class for his Masterclass Series.

not doing that.

"I'm focusing on capitalizing on our largest stage and our professional crew, and so our summer camps that we are offering is a backstage technical theater summer camp, which includes teaching the kids about all the behind-the-scenes, such as spotlights and pulling the big ropes."

Involving and teaching the students about the backstage expands their abilities and talents within theater, and they learn skills they can bring back to school with them.

One of the things the director has really tried to focus on is the idea of access to the building.

"There are a lot of people that don't think this building is a place that's for them," Gumlak explained, "whether

that's because of accessibility, challenges, whether that's because of the ticket prices or content that's being shown on stage. You kind of have to feel that this is a place for you.

"We are doing a bunch of work and really trying to dismantle that idea, that this is only for certain kind of person to come. I talk about throwing the doors open and letting folks in, showing them what we do here and messaging that what we do here is as much as it is for anybody else."

Gumlak said the Van Wezel plays the role of a hub for the arts here, and he gets to program experiences that are connected to this place — and he loves it.

"I am really passionate about what I'm doing here," he enthused. "And what's really great is that we get to — as all the

Van Wezel Masterclass Series with Education Director Justin Gumlak

- **"Ain't Too Proud"** – 10:30-11:45 a.m. Thursday, Feb. 22
- **"Jagged Little Pill"** – 10:30-11:45 a.m. Monday, Feb. 26
- **"Little Women"** – 10:30-11:45 a.m. Wednesday, March 6
- **"Hamilton"** – 10:30-11:45 a.m. Wednesday, March 27; 5:30-7 p.m. Thursday, March 28; 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Saturday, March 30; 10:30-11:45 a.m. Thursday, April 4
- **"Shrek the Musical"** – 5:30-7 p.m. Tuesday, April 16; 10:30-11:45 a.m. Wednesday, April 17

- **Where:** Education Room of the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, 777 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota
- **Cost:** \$30 per class or \$100 for a package of four classes (space is limited)
- **To register:** Margaret Lindsey at 941-263-6750 or Margaret.Lindsey@sarasotaFL.gov
- **Info:** see www.vanwezel.org/news/masterclass or www.artwork-sanywhere.org, or email Justin.Gumlak@sarasotafl.gov

cultural institutions of this community — provide parents and students these extension experiences, bringing art into their lives and making art relevant. And what's relevant to kids is what they are learning in school.

"To be able to help these families infuse the arts into their lives in various ways is an absolute privilege, honor and thrill for me." 🌟

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