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Sklar Search in Nashua

Top talent scout offers sage advice to aspiring young performers

By JOHN COLLINS
The Broadcaster

NASHUA — For an entire afternoon one Saturday in December, the dancing stopped at Jeannine's Dancers Stoppe.

Unless you count the way special guest lecturer, Broadway producer and talent scout Peter Sklar, whose eyes danced as he scanned the facial expres-

sions and body language of two dozen mostly adolescent females and their parents seated before him.

Or the way Sklar — a nationally recognized authority on child development, eating disorders, and self-proclaimed “No. 1 expert on how to make it” in the entertainment industry — waltzed among the audience who had gathered at Jeannine’s for two rea-

sons: either they really wanted to listen to Sklar’s life-changing career advice or they wanted to be “discovered” in the same magical way that Mischa Barton (Fox TV’s *The O.C.*), Zachery Ty Bryan (Bradon in ABC’s *Home Improvement*), Rick Schroder (CBS’ *Silver Spoons*, *NYPD Blue*, etc.) and Reese Witherspoon (*Legally Blonde*) benefited

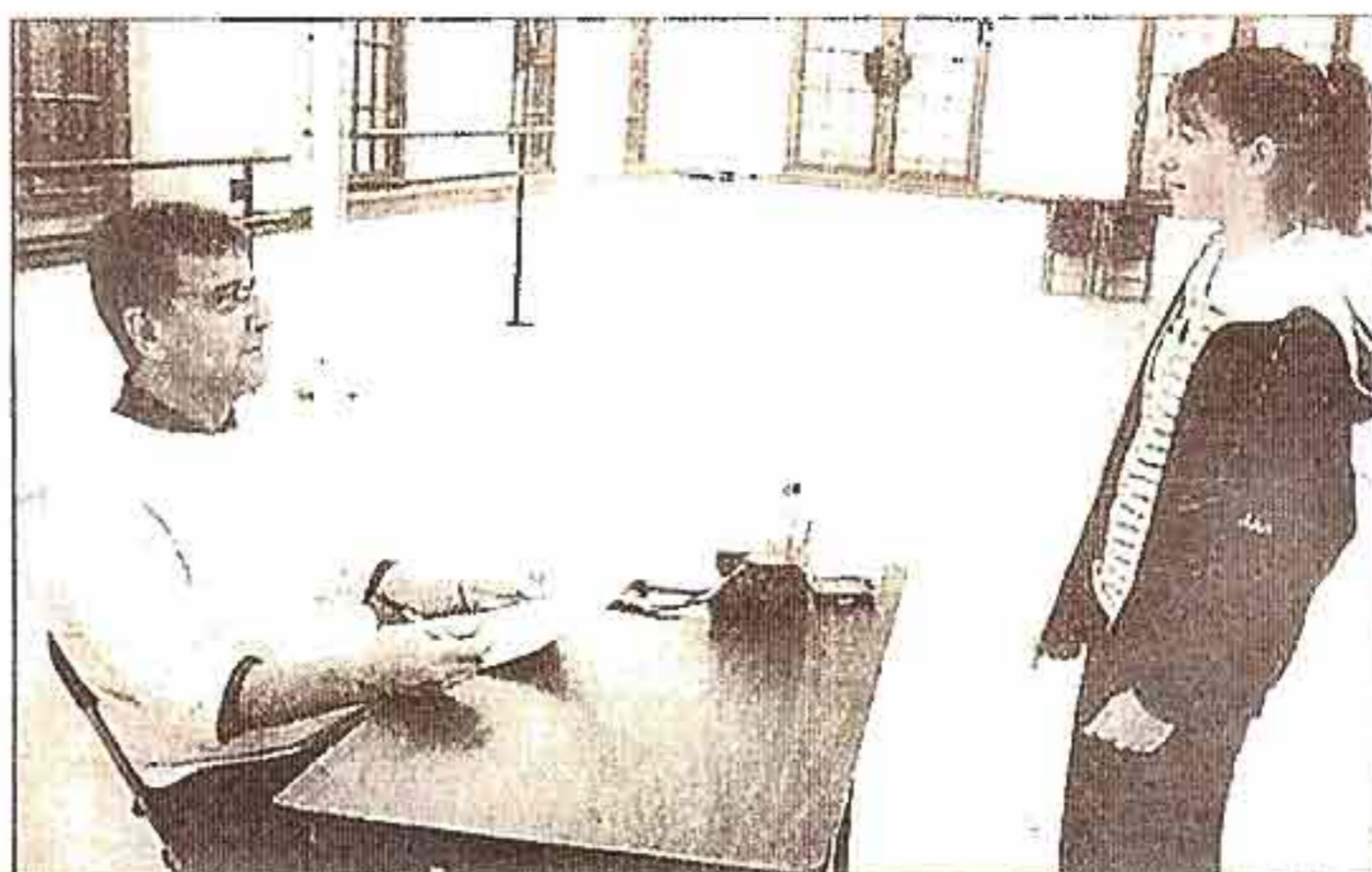
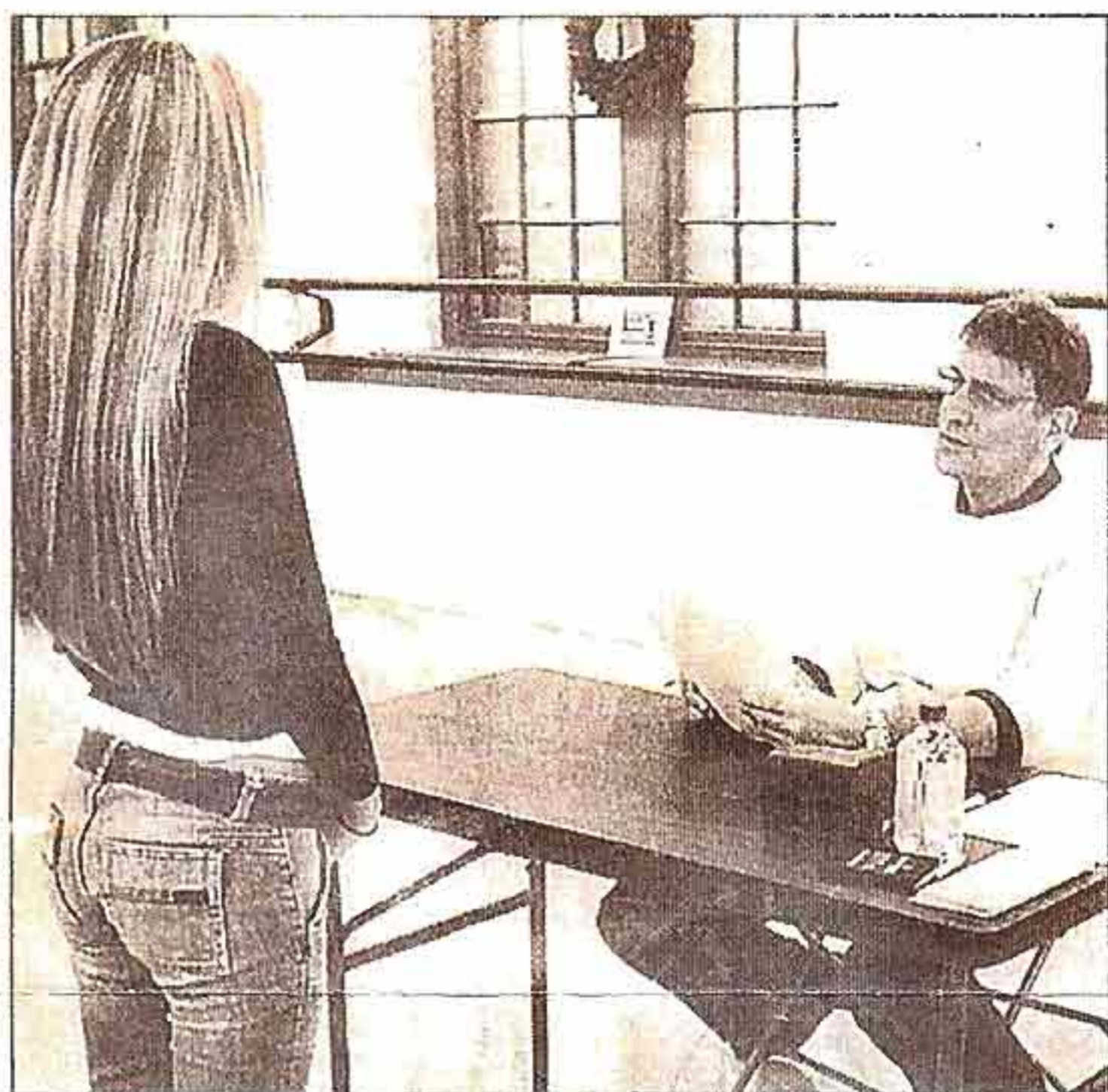
Peter Sklar, who has helped mold the careers of Reese Witherspoon and Rick Schroeder to name a few, imparts some show-business wisdom recently to a rapt audience at Jeannine’s Dancers Stoppe in Nashua.

BROADCASTER/JOHN COLLINS

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2004

THE BROADCASTER

Please see **SKLAR/9**
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2004



Peter Sklar interviews 16-year-old Christine Marston of Hudson, left photo, Jennifer Smith, 13, of Nashua, top photo, after their auditions. They were two of 10 girls invited to attend his performing arts workshop next summer.

BROADCASTER PHOTOS / JOHN COLLINS

Sklar's star search comes to Nashua

SKLAR/From Page 1

from having met Sklar as children.

"By a show of hands, how many of you believe I can actually tell you right now what the secret to making it in the entertainment industry is?" Sklar asks in the middle of his talk, having just completely discounted looks, luck, talent, training, connections or wanting it real bad as reasons why someone gets hired for a part on stage or screen. Most audience members raise their hands.

"I will tell you how to make it," says Sklar, "but first you must promise me, swear to me that you will do something. It's reasonable, won't hurt you. It's morally good, legal and possible to do without too much strain. It's certain to make you successful for your whole life. So how many of you would do it?"

More hands go

"I'm going to tell you some things to do, which, if you do these things, you will make it. You will be successful for the rest of your life. If you do not do the things I tell you, you will not make it no matter how talented you are, how good looking you are, how smart, how much you want it, or how many classes you take. You will go nowhere. At least not for long. Nobody ever does. Never, ever has there been an exception to this."

They promise.

And for the final 30 minutes of Peter Sklar's talk, his rapt audience hears the four vital things they must do to become the next Sarah Jessica Parker, Ricki Lake or Ashley Bashium.

It's a week before his New Hampshire visit and Peter Sklar, who holds a master's degree in child development from Harvard, is speaking on a cell

about to deliver the same "Young Dreams, Fears, Hopes & Fantasies of Fame" lecture to some Florida kids that his audience at Jeannine's Dance Stoppe in Nashua and Broadway Bound in Merrimack will hear five days later. He has taken a break from his duties as producer of the upcoming Broadway musical, *The Kid Who Played the Palace*, to give a series of these talks around the country for which he charges no fee.

"It does two things for us," explains Sklar about his appearances. "It gets the name of the show out there, and it gives me a chance to get out there as an educator. And we do find some kids, too. I've discovered quite a few kids at these things. But I

don't present it heavily like that, because I don't want people sitting there waiting for the moment when I discover their kid. I want them there to listen and to learn something."

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For 90 minutes in Nashua on Dec. 11, Sklar manages to hold the attention of his young audience of aspiring dancers, singers, actresses and their parents. He does it by joking about their looks and the opposite sex ("Have you noticed that

Please see **SKLAR/10**

Top talent scout offers steps to success

SKLAR/From Page 9

some boys look better than others" and "Who's smarter, boys or girls?"). He recites hip-hop lyrics. He thumb-wrestles a 13-year-old girl in the front row.

But it's all just to hook them into paying close attention to the most important advice the kids have yet to or will ever hear, Sklar claims, in their budding performing careers.

There is pin-drop silence in the room as Sklar imparts the four most critical steps the young performers need to take in order to "make it" in the entertainment industry.

It's the third of Sklar's four steps — after being self-aware and take care of yourself — that causes his young female audience to shift uncomfortably in their seats.

"Get rid of the boyfriend," he says. "No boyfriends until you're at least 25 and you've had some measure of success in the business. Careers and relationships do not mix. If dumping the boyfriend is unthinkable, you do not have the mentality to pursue this career."

Sklar concludes his talk with step number four, which is to "politely and respectfully ignore the advice of every single grownup in

your life" (long pause, laughter) who tells you the following: "There's so much competition in the performing arts, you really need to have something else to fall back on."

"That's the way it works, boys and girls," Sklar concludes. "You know, there are worse things that you could do with your life than become an accountant, or a doctor, or lawyer, except if what you really wanted was to become a performer. And then you wake up one day, and you're 40 or 50 years old, and it's too late. That, kids, in the words of the immortal Beavis and Butthead, 'will suck like nothing has sucked before.'"

He calls for a five-minute break to allow people to leave if they decide it's not for them. Most stick around to take up Sklar's offer for an on-the-spot audition. By the end of the afternoon he invites 10 of the girls at Jeannine's to attend his critically acclaimed nine-day performing arts workshop that he has been conducted in upstate New York every summer since 1984.

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Dance studio owner Jeannine Martin was grateful for Sklar's appearance.

"He said a lot of things that really make sense, and a lot of what us (Dancers' Stoppe instructors) say all the time. His advice is something kids can use for a long-lived career and I do hope they remember it."

Martin says she fears that many of the kids are apt to let Sklar's advice go in one ear and out the other.

"Because, unfortunately, I know a lot of them don't want to hear this. They want (success) now. Today. They don't want to have to do things that they have to keep working on their whole life."