

'Those who make it are permitted to perform only material deemed suitable for their ages. So "Ten Cents a Dance" and "Hey, Big Spender" are out.'



HARRY HAMBURG DAILY NEWS

Getting coaching, experience—and above all, exposure: Sasha Chamlin, 16 (above); J.D. Roth, 12 (top right); John Morqal, 9.

Where life is a kiddie cabaret

A new club offers 'Beginnings' for pint-sized stars

By JOANNE KAUFMAN

WOULD A BROADWAY star, a certified Broadway star, in between doing eight shows a week, taking curtain calls, phone calls, and rubbing lapels with talk show hosts, have the time or the slightest inclination to journey some 40 blocks northeast of the Great White Way to sing on a miniscule stage for no pay, no billing, no star on the dressing room door—in fact, no dressing room?

The answer appears to be a clarion "yes" for nearly every child performer in the Broadway companies of "Evita," "Peter Pan," and "Annie," and for several dozen half-pint or half-quart troupers appearing in soap operas and commercials. They—all 100 of them, ranging in age from seven to 17—are part of

"Beginnings," New York's first professional showcase for children.

Housed at Something Different, a boîte on 1st Avenue and 78th Street serving up nothing more sinful than hot fudge sundaes, and presided over by Peter Sklar and Patricia Young, "Beginnings" debuted five months ago, and since then has performed almost exclusively to standing and lap-sitting room only. The overflow crowd has included such youthful non-crooners as Ricky Schroder, Justin Henry, Brooke Shields, and Melissa ("Me and Max") Michaelson.

"There was previously no place for kids who wanted to be professional to perform," says Sklar. "They get coaching, someone to choreograph their numbers, material for their repertoires, material they can use for auditions. And they get exposure."

Exposure, quite clearly, is the name of the game here. According to Sklar, representatives from most of the casting agencies in the city have attended at least one show ("Beginnings" is staged twice weekly, Saturday from 6 to 7 p.m. and Sunday from 4:30 to 5:30). Deborah Brown, a casting agent for the film "Mommie Dearest" recently requisitioned some young blondes for the Christina Crawford roles, while the ad agency Ogilvy and Mather has been eyeing the moppets for "Shake 'n Bake" commercial chores.

But getting into "Beginnings" is not quite—well, not quite child's play. This is not a junior grade "Catch a Rising Star"—not an operation that allows a kid simply to walk in off the street, grab the microphone and belt out "I Enjoy Being a Girl." Instead, there are monthly auditions of 40-50 aspirants. It might be more of a calf than cattle call, but it contains the same heartbreaking bottom line: only about eight percent of those auditioned make it into the program.

And those who do make it, Sklar emphasizes, are permitted to perform only material deemed suitable to their ages. "It's more exciting to see a 10-year-old

be a 10-year-old than trying to dress the child up." In other words, "Ten Cents a Dance" and "Hey, Big Spender" are out—along with such overdone ditties as "Tomorrow," "New York, New York" and "What I Did For Love." Instead, the in-kids wearing the bright yellow "Beginnings" sweat shirts wrap vocal chords around such Sklar-sanctioned tunes as "My Buddy" and "Abba Dabba Honeymoon."

Though "Beginnings" is billed as the first professional showcase for children, some of its members haven't got a credit to their names. Caroline Greenberg, a 12-year-old from Long Island, was "discovered" by Sklar at Stagedoor Manor, and has lately been regaling audiences at Something Different with her spirited rendition of "You Gotta Be a Football Hero."

"I tried out for 'Annie,'" she explained with a resigned air. "But they told me I was too tall."

OTHER "BEGINNINGS" PERFORMERS, however, might seem well on their way to the middle of their careers: Allison Smith, the current Annie in "Annie"; her immediate predecessor, Sarah Jessica Parker; Jonathan Ward, who played Michael in "Peter Pan" and is now in "Macbeth"; and Johnny Morqal, one of the lost boys in "Peter Pan."

What would bring such seemingly established small fry to the "Beginnings" stage? "It's fun," says Allison, simply. "I sing 'up' songs. And more producers have seen me since I've been here."

"I'm not thinking of this as exposure for Allison," says her mother. "I just think it's good for her to do other songs besides the 'Annie' ones. People think all she knows is 'Tomorrow' and 'Maybe.'"

It's a little after 7 p.m. on a Saturday and the performers in tonight's "Beginnings" lineup are enjoying the fruits—or, in this case, the ice cream sundaes—of their labors. Which suggests another benefit of the program, to even the most seasoned performer: with this pay, there can be no question of an agent claiming 10 per cent.



Paid in ice cream: Janine Young, 12.