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Where to Scout the Youngest Talent

WEEKENDER GUIDE

By ELEANOR BLAU

In bright yellow sweatshirts and gleaming smiles, 18 youngsters on a stage in the middle of a restaurant sang out their purpose: "Lookin' for bookin's, what you get is what you see!" while casting directors in the audience watched and mothers beamed.

The setting was a little place specializing in sweets called "Something Different," on First Avenue between 77th and 78th Streets. Usually, the restaurant — billed as "New York's first dessert nightclub" — features singing adult waiters and waitresses. But this occasion was a session of "Beginnings," a showcase for talented singers between the ages of 7 and 17, most of them working professionals. "Beginnings" is staged at the restaurant every Saturday and Monday at 7 P.M. and Sundays at 3:30 and 5:30. (No admission charge, but there's a \$4 minimum except for the Monday event).

More than 100 children are in the repertory program, including some already successful performers. Allison Smith, for instance, who now has the title role of "Annie" on Broadway was among the performers the other day — a small 10-year-old with short red hair, delicate features and a dead-on-pitch voice that seemed capable of shattering the glass front wall of "Something Different."

The children perform to further their careers; they and their parents know that directors and agents looking for young talent are invited to attend and are in the audience. And if any of the youngsters felt less than confident the other day, none let it show.

Taking her turn after the introductory ensemble song, Diana Barrows, a 14-year-old with blond pigtailed, sat on a high stool in front of the studio piano for the opening of her song, hand mike held with accustomed ease, then jumped from her perch for an animated rendition of "Jeepers, Creepers."

Lara Berk, 8½ and tiny, with red wool bows dividing her hair, sang "You're Driving Me Crazy" in a clear nasal voice, getting down on one knee at one point as a waitress jiggled a tambourine.

John Morgal, 9, bounded about the

little stage, facing one half of the audience then turning to the other, eyes wide with enthusiasm, singing "Smile, Dum Ya, Smile," which he ended with an exuberant "yeah!"

Playing piano accompaniment and introducing each performer ("and now a young man from Elkridge, Md., a very, very dynamic fellow, please put your hands together for Jonathan Ward") was Peter Sklar, who thought up the showcase venture.

Mr. Sklar, a 31-year-old studio pianist and former community theater director, founded "Beginnings" four months ago with Patricia Young, the owner of "Something Different."

"I felt there was a need," he explained. "New York has the top theaters and commercials, filming is becoming more important here, and it is the modeling capital. You've got kids in all those levels and yet there was nothing that drew all of them together."

This was a way to make them visible to prospective employers and also add an entertainment feature for the restaurant. Participants in the program, who generally perform about once every other week, also take part in non-public discussion groups, which Mr. Sklar tapes and which he and a partner hope to use for a musical about children in show business.

"Kids are very, very hot right now. You talk to any agent or producer, they're looking for kids," observed Mr. Sklar, who has a master's degree in education from Harvard and who also attended Juilliard. Why this interest in youth? "Part of it is nostalgic," he reflected, "and part of it is because kids sell. Madison Avenue is discovering this; you believe a kid in a commercial."

The young performers in "Beginnings" do not get paid. They do, however, get free coaching by vocal specialists as well as by specialists in staging and choreography before going in front of the eating public at "Something Different." "It's a trade-off," Mr. Sklar said, noting that several of the children have obtained jobs as a result of the showcase.

He is adamant about the "philosophy" of "Beginnings." The child with the most commercial appeal, he said, is the child whose unique and natural appeal is brought out. That means, among other things, being a child, not a miniature adult, he said. He pointed out that the songs he chooses for them are not love songs or "Barbra Streisand numbers," but suitable fare. The other day, for example, the program included two songs from "Sesame Street," and the line "I've got my man" from Gershwin's "I've Got Rhythm" was changed to "I've got my dad."

Show biz, though, has a way of maturing young minds. "I seriously started in this business when I was 7½," reported Lara Berk, the little singer with red wool bows, which means her professional life began a year ago. She is in the Metropolitan Opera's Children's Chorus and had an Off Broadway part in "Really Rosie," she said, adding that she did diaper commercials too long ago to remember.



Jonathan Ward (left), formerly in "Peter Pan," and Allison Smith, the lead now in "Annie," among talented children in the showcase "Beginnings." See page C1.

Megan Forste of "Evita" appears in "Beginnings" on Sunday.

Lara, who lives in Short Hills, N.J., seemed eager to chat, revealing that her father is a psychiatrist and her mother "was a social worker but is a regular mother now." What are Lara's goals? "I want to sing, dance and act. I want to be in 'Annie' and I want to do bigger and better things," she said.

Stefanie Ann Levy, 14, was a little more reflective about her goals. "I want to do everything," she began. "I want to be a serious actor, but the thing I love most is performing on stage for an audience. I think it's in my blood. I like to get a response. My dad says when I'm not in a show I'm a normal moody teen-ager. When I am in one, I'm happy."

Stefanie Ann, who has played an orphan in a road company "Annie" in California, done commercials and appeared in an American revue in Japan, made it clear that she was not the product of the proverbially pushy stage mother. "I've always begged my parents to be an actress," she said. "My mom was encouraging, but she also wanted me to have a childhood, to have a basic togetherness." And is the young performer together? "I think so," she said with a laugh. "I'm a little kookie, but..."

Was there nothing she disliked about show business? "Well," Stefanie Ann considered, "sometimes it gets political. And there's the competition, I guess. But I realized that, really, being competitive is just a protective device because you can get rejected so easily."



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