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—Contributor.....Annie Landenberger
—Contributor email.....verbatimvt@gmail.com
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Notes from editor (not for publication):

In a couple of places, I think your sentences were a little too jam-packed. I tried to tease them out and make them read with less effort. In general, I try to keep subjects closer to verbs so you don't have to backtrack. Here's [some good advice from Roy Peter Clark about right-branching sentences](#), a technique that lets you craft longer, compound-complex sentences with maximum communication.

I do try to break up quotes. If I see a quote that goes more than two or three lines in this format, I'll jump in. I try to keep paragraphs alternating longer and shorter. Contrast keeps it lively.

I love the quotes from the kids. It elevates their voices and gives the paper texture and community voice. And I loved the theme of how happy these alumni were to come back and give back.

Also: Line 49: His interpretation? I edited as though it were. Please flag if I overstepped here.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 Mentoring the next generation of thespians

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

2 Leland and Gray Players' new production of 'Aladdin'
3 features a diverse cast, from fourth-graders to grown-ups — led
4 by a team of alumni who are returning to their alma mater

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

#####BEGIN TEXT#####

6 At a Sunday rehearsal in October, a cluster of nearly
7 three dozen theater folks from fourth-graders to grown-ups set to
8 another rehearsal and crew session for the Leland and Gray
9 (L&G) Players' production of the junior version of the musical
10 *Aladdin*.

11 With sign painting in one corner, costuming in the
12 backstage space, dance step review "center stage" (on the Dutton
13 Gymnasium floor), sound techs doing checks, and directors
14 conferring and leading, it was a microcosm of creative
15 community — an intentional coming together to produce
16 something good for the benefit of all involved and all who
17 witness.

18 Such is live theater, a potent and invaluable growth
19 vehicle for young people.

20 With music by Alan Menken, lyrics by Howard Ashman,
21 Tim Rice, and Chad Beguelin, and book by Beguelin, the musical
22 opens Thursday in the Dutton Theater space.

23 The show's plot finds Aladdin and his three friends,
24 Babkak, Omar, and Kassim, all down on their luck in a faraway
25 time and place where one could believe in magic and genies.

26 A Players' press release sets up the premise: "Aladdin
27 discovers a magic lamp and the Genie who has the power to
28 grant three wishes. Wanting to earn the respect of the princess,
29 Jasmine, Aladdin embarks on an adventure that will test his will
30 and his moral character."

31 The annual musical, a Players' tradition for nearly 30
32 years at the middle/high school in Townshend, this year's
33 production features several elementary school performers to
34 round out the cast.

35 The elementary schoolers first joined a Players' cast in
36 2006, when 40 appeared in *The Wizard of Oz* as Munchkins,
37 poppies, monkeys, and the like. Many returned as street urchins

38 in the Players' 2007 production of *Oliver!* A few joined in casts of
39 musicals in later years, and nearly 30 signed on for the 2015
40 Players' reprise of *The Wizard of Oz*.

41 According to Ray Chapin, formerly director of Thetford
42 Academy's theater program and now in his second year with the
43 L&G troupe, more Players were needed for last year's production
44 of *Shrek* "so that we could have a full show."

45 "This year, it was the same situation," he says. "We
46 needed to fill some roles, so we have some repeat customers and
47 a few new students from the elementary schools."

48 The six young actors this year represent a good turnout,
49 given changing demographics and a decrease in school
50 enrollments, he says.

51 Chapin adds that involving the elementary schools in the
52 6th-to-12th-grade middle/high school's production is a good
53 vehicle for program development, in that it "generates some
54 excitement there so that when they move into the 6th grade
55 they're aware" of the Players as an after-school activity option.

56 Another tool for stirring enthusiasm, he notes, is inviting
57 elementary school students to a special matinee of the annual
58 musical.

59 A practice that started in 2003 when area elementary
60 schoolers attended the Players' *Peter Pan* was revived last year
61 when Townshend Elementary was invited to *Shrek* and continued
62 this year when Townshend, NewBrook, and Wardsboro
63 elementary schools were treated to an *Aladdin* matinee.

64 Among Chapin's assistants for this production is Kianelise
65 "Kiki" Peña, a Players' alumna ('24).

66 Back in the area in a time of transition, Peña says that a
67 part of what motivates her to assist is that theater meant
68 "everything" to her at L&G.

69 "During the school day all I could think about was
70 getting to rehearsal and just going over what I'd practiced the
71 night before — just being with everyone, sharing that love," she
72 says. "For me, that's always what it's been about, so coming back

73 as an adult, I see it through a different lens: Now I can pass it
74 on."

75 Building community

76 Peña notes the community building she sees "when
77 they're painting, when they're acting, [when] they're going over
78 their lines."

79 "We can see the bond everywhere," she says. "It just
80 makes it all worth it when showtime comes and everything's built
81 and you just think about all those smaller moments of the
82 painting or the acting and the costuming — how [that bond]
83 made this beautiful thing."

84 Of the value of theater work for a young person, Peña
85 reflects: "The way I view it and value is that coming from having
86 troubles at home or at school" and missing a sense of secure
87 belonging, "you come to the theater and feel like 'I found my
88 people.'

89 "That's the great part about it," she continues. "I found
90 myself in the characters I was playing and it felt right, it felt
91 comfortable, and it gave me the confidence to just go out and
92 talk to people, to connect."

93 When it comes to community, she says, "I think one
94 thing we're trying to rebuild is just the support from the school,
95 from the parents, and from just community members — seeing
96 the theater program and all the hard work" that goes into
97 mounting a production — well beyond the learning of lines and
98 performing.

99 Peña adds that she and a few other Players alumni are
100 interested in bringing back the low-cost Players' Summer
101 Performing Arts Exploration (SPAE), which ran from 2009 to 2019
102 under the direction of Karlie Kauffeld ('10) and other alumni.

103 She notes that the SPAE "opened the door" for area
104 youngsters who then move on to become Players.

105 Steven Shine, a Players' alumnus, has been on board,
106 too, to help with sets and other aspects of production.

107 "I love it," he says. "It's just so fun seeing them grow up."

108 Chapin is a steady advocate for the program in which
109 participants learn that every role — onstage and off — is integral
110 and essential, and he notes the value of continuity and
111 experiential learning.

112 He says he's grateful for Peña and Shine, as well as for
113 Players' alumnus Peter Broussard ('22), who has been assisting
114 with technical aspects of productions since graduating.

115 Learning the ropes

116 *The Commons* had a chance to talk with some of the
117 fourth- and fifth-graders in the *Aladdin* cast.

118 Shannon Patnode said of the experience: "You learn how
119 to project well, and you learn how to, like, trust people. You trust
120 people who you are on stage with."

121 Madeline Jameson, daughter of one of the first Players,
122 Katherine Jameson ('96), was preparing to rehearse with Teagan
123 McFalls, who shared that her aunt is in the performing arts "and I
124 really like singing and dancing."

125 "My grandma and my mom have been in shows, and in
126 [Los Angeles, where her family had lived], there was an *Aladdin*
127 show and I totally wanted to [be involved, but] it was \$700 to get
128 in and for like, half a part," Madeline said.

129 Reflecting on what she's learned, Madeline said: "I used
130 to not like being on stage [but now I am] comfortable on a stage,
131 and I learned you have to understand what's going to happen. I'm
132 learning about stage directions, too" and other theater
133 terminology, "so it's kind of cool to learn all that stuff."

134 Fourth-grader Laila Payne said that "you get to kind of
135 play with stuff and make believe. And you get to wear costumes."

136 As the youngsters move confidently into place to
137 rehearse a dance number, performer and student choreographer
138 Gianna "Gigi" Birri, a sophomore who is playing the Genie, takes
139 a minute.

140 "I've been here since sixth-grade, from an ensemble part
141 in *Mamma Mia!* to Gretchen Wieners in *Mean Girls* to Donkey in
142 *Shrek*."

143 Saying she "would love to pursue theater — performing
144 arts — after school, whether dancing, singing, or acting," she
145 adds: "It's been a big part of my life, and I'd like to keep it that
146 way."

147 Sophomore Mackson Wells, son of L&G alumna and
148 current faculty member Beth Wells and grandson of retired
149 NewBrook Elementary teacher Marcia Wells, is nephew to
150 Players' alumnus Jeff Wells, now an architect in New York City.

151 Committed and focused as Birri, Wells recalls starting
152 while in sixth grade.

153 "My first performance was in *Mamma Mia*," he says.
154 "And just growing from being in the ensemble to being Pugsley
155 [in *The Addams Family*] and then to *Shrek* and now to *Aladdin*
156 has been just such an amazing process."

157 Wells adds that he's "learned new skills while making
158 new friends and making a family out of people I don't really
159 know."

160 "Obviously, I'm with them every day after school for
161 three months in a row at a time," he says. "So you really just
162 know how to make a family and make sure that everyone feels
163 comfortable and safe."

164 Birri adds: "You learn how to work with people you don't
165 really know — different ages, from fourth-graders all the way to
166 seniors. So it's nice to have those [moments] where you can bond
167 with people younger and older," and to have skills for adapting.

168 Like Birri, Wells hopes to pursue the performing arts after
169 high school.

170 Of his time with the Players, he adds: "Seriously, I don't
171 know what I would do without the people I did it with. I get the
172 privilege to be with all these amazing people, the costume
173 department, the tech, the lights, all of my directors: They're just so
174 awesome."

175 Last week, several Leland and Gray Players were
176 inducted into their newly-formed chapter of the International
177 Thespian Society, the pledge for which is “I promise to perform
178 my part as well as I can; to accept praise and criticism with
179 grace; to cooperate with my fellow Thespians and work for the
180 good of the troupe; and to share my love of theatre.”

181 One can see the pledge upheld this weekend at the
182 Dutton Theater on Route 30, next to the Townshend Town Hall.
183 Alladin runs Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Nov. 13–15, at 7 p.m.;
184 and the 15th at 2 p.m. Admission is \$10. for adults and \$5 for
185 students at the door.

186 When asked about the involvement of younger Players in
187 Leland and Gray productions, Wells said that “being the lead in
188 these musicals and being able to teach little kids the way that the
189 bigger kids [had] taught me really just makes me feel proud —
190 that someday these kids will be doing what I’m doing.”

191 “It feels like we’re passing the torch to the elementary
192 kids,” Birri adds. “The older kids were showing us, and now
193 we’re the older kids showing them [...], and seeing everyone
194 grow as we have grown is incredible.”

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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