

‘I’ve got your back’: How Tuacahn’s child actors balance school, family and singing their hearts out on stage

Three “School of Rock” kids talk about the highs and lows —but mostly the highs — of professional theater.



(Tuacahn Amphitheatre) Jonathan Wagner, center, plays Dewey Finn in Tuacahn's "School of Rock." Wagner's pre-show ritual reminds the cast's kids that they have each other's backs.

By Kaitlyn Bancroft | Sep. 19, 2021, 1:33 p.m.

Editor's note • *This article is part of 150 Things To Do, a reporting project and newsletter exploring the best that Utah has to offer. [Click here](#) to sign up for the 150 Things weekly newsletter.*

Every night before the show, Jonathan Wagner gathers the cast's kids into a huddle.

He encourages them and helps get the group energized for the performance; then they all pat each other's backs and say, "I've got your back, I've got your back."

And then they all rock out on Tuacahn's stage in front of nearly 2,000 people — and yes, the kids do play all the instruments themselves.

The show is "School of Rock," playing now through Oct. 22. Wagner stars as Dewey Finn, a wannabe rockstar who turns a class of prep school students into a force of rock n' roll to be reckoned with.

Wagner (who is not a child) made his Broadway debut as the understudy for the role he now plays in "School of Rock." As with many of the adult actors who perform at Tuacahn each year, he is a member of the Actor's Equity Association and (setting aside COVID-19's devastating effect on the performing arts industry) regularly performs at professional theaters across the country.

The pre-show ritual he leads before each "School of Rock" performance at Tuacahn has become so cherished by the production's child actors that three of them — in separate interviews — talked about it unprompted.

"It's important to connect before the show so that we know everyone has each other's backs on stage," said Lydia Ricks, 14, who plays backup singer Marcy and understudies as both bassist Katie Travis and class know-it-all Summer Hathaway.

Adrienne Amanda Morrow, 14, plays drummer Freddy Hamilton and also understudies as Katie Travis. She said Wagner's tradition helps her calm any nerves she might be feeling before going on stage.

"Everyone there, if you're ever stuck or you need help, they're always there to catch you or to support you," she said.

12-year-old Jordan Sullivan, who plays tech-savvy student Mason Ward, said he also finds the cast huddle to be calming before shows. He added it's simply nice to know that the other actors are behind him.

It's little wonder that Lydia, Adrienne and Jordan value their fellow cast member's support. On top of the responsibilities common to their age group — school, family, social lives — they're also handling the pressures that come from performing with southern Utah's most well-known professional theater, one that routinely recruits Broadway-level talent for its outdoor performances.



(Tuacahn) Lydia Ricks, 14, performs as the titular character in Tuacahn's 2021 production of "Annie."

For some, like Lydia, that means being the face of multiple musicals. Lydia first got involved with Tuacahn in 2018, when she was cast as the titular character in "Matilda." This summer, she had the starring role in "Annie." She's not the only talented kid in her family, either — her little sister, 11-year-old Penny Ricks, is playing student and roadie Sophie in "School of Rock" right now, her first Tuacahn play.

For others, like Adrienne, being at Tuacahn means leaving home for months at a time. Adrienne came to southern Utah from her home in California at the end of May and

currently lives in Tuacahn-provided housing with her mother. Her father flies in every few weeks to see her perform. She'll attend school online while the show runs into October.

For cast members like Jordan, musical theater is the family business. His parents, Shari and A.J. Sullivan, pursued theater careers in New York City and Los Angeles before settling in southern Utah to work with Tuacahn. Shari, a former Radio City Rockette, started as an actor before taking an assistant producer role, while A.J. is now a stage manager.

Jordan has been performing at Tuacahn since age 4 and has now been in six shows. His little brother, 8-year-old Hudson Sullivan, is the understudy for Chip in Tuacahn's "Beauty and the Beast" (running through Oct. 23).

Days can get long for Lydia, Adrienne and Jordan — and their nights even longer. With multiple shows running at once, their schedules are sometimes tight and complicated.

But none of them utter a word of complaint. Instead, they talk enthusiastically about why they juggle all the stress and pressure: because they love musical theater.

Jordan said he enjoys improving his singing voice and learning new skills like tap dancing; Adrienne said she likes combining her talents on stage.

Lydia said it's the cast members that make everything worth it, especially the other kids.

"I feel like everybody in the cast is always so kind and so professional, and I feel like I learn so much from the adults and the kids," she said. "[The kids] are so great. You can always find a party when the kids are around."

Getting involved

Lydia's mother, Ruby Ricks, said her daughter has always been a singer, and it wasn't long before she and her husband learned that Lydia had a gift for picking up songs from musicals. In 2018, when Lydia was 11, a vocal teacher encouraged her to try out for Tuacahn's "Matilda."

Ruby said she thought the audition was a long shot — Lydia’s only previous experience was in a few community theater shows, and she’d never taken any dance classes before that summer — but the next thing she knew, Lydia had been cast as the title character.

After the national tour of “Matilda” ended, Tuacahn was the first place the show was performed, according to theater news website [Broadway World](#).

“So that was really exciting for me to be able to be the face of ‘Matilda,’” Lydia said.

Since then, she’s juggled a variety of music and dance classes between school, family life and being in more Tuacahn musicals. For “School of Rock,” her grandfather gave her bass lessons for her understudy role of Katie Travis.

Her summer was intense: during one six week period, she was rehearsing for “School of Rock” from noon to 6 p.m., then performing in “Annie” starting at around 8 p.m. Pinning on the curly red wig before shows helped her make the mental shift from one musical to another, Lydia said.

Now, with school starting, and with rehearsals no longer taking up her afternoons, Lydia said a typical day for her begins around 7 a.m., which can be difficult after late nights performing. She attends three class periods in person, then comes home for two online classes, which gives her some flexibility. She’s in ninth grade this year but is taking some tenth grade classes online in the hopes of getting ahead with her schooling.

“Grades are a priority in our family,” she said.



(Leavitt Wells) Adrienne Amanda Morrow plays drummer Freddy Hamilton in Tuacahn's "School of Rock."

For Adrienne, this summer has been more relaxed. Since she's away from home, she's not currently involved in extracurriculars like dance and music lessons, so she had a lot of time off when "School of Rock" rehearsals ended. Now she's attending school online and will transfer back to her school in California, Orange County School of the Arts, next semester.

Adrienne said "School of Rock" is her first Tuacahn musical. She auditioned after a friend from a community theater show thought she might be a good fit for a production that requires its actors to play live music.

She's been a drummer for about three years, Adrienne said. Her "School of Rock" character, drummer Freddy Hamilton, is typically played by a boy.

"I think people find it really cool [that I play Freddy] because they don't usually see girls play drums," she said.

For Jordan, there's virtually never been a time that he hasn't been balancing theater with the rest of his life. Shari, his mom, said he was memorizing songs at age 2; when he was 4, Tuacahn was looking for more boys to be in "The Wizard of Oz," and it became Jordan's first Tuacahn show.

She added that she tries to be mindful of Jordan's limits and what he wants. Once, while performing in "A Charlie Brown Christmas" at a community theater, he was juggling musical commitments on top of piano, flag football and school activities. Shari asked Jordan if she was overscheduling him — but his answer was an emphatic "No." That conviction hasn't changed as he's continued acting with Tuacahn.

"[The kids] love each other and they love performing," Shari said.

Ruby, Lydia's mom, echoed concerns about the taxing schedule. Musical theater is something kids really have to want, she said, and it's important that parents listen if their kids say they don't want to perform anymore.

"It's so much work. It's only worth it if you really love it," she said.

She also said she's grateful for how Tuacahn protects its child actors. There are two "child wranglers" with the kids at all times, who have kept her constantly updated, Ruby said. The kids also have a separate dressing room from the adult actors, and everyone is background checked.

"I feel like they've provided a very safe environment for the kids," Ruby said.

Looking ahead



(Provided by Shari Sullivan) Jordan Sullivan plays tech genius Mason Ward in Tuacahn's "School of Rock."

For Lydia, Adrienne and Jordan, theater is their present, but their futures may hold a variety of pursuits.

Adrienne said when she's older, she'd like to have a profession in medicine or law while performing on the side.

Jordan isn't certain yet what he'd like to do when he grows up; for now, he's happy to keep performing, he said.

And Lydia said her future might hold a mix of both theater and other jobs. Her dad is a civil engineer, and she might like to work for him someday. Maybe, she said, she'll end up pursuing degrees in both theater and engineering.

Her advice for kids wanting to break into theater? Go big with your character choices when auditioning, but never go home — keep trying.

“Just make your character really big, no matter how big [the role] really is and how many lines you have, because that’s not important,” she said. “People go to theaters to escape real life. And so you’ve got to bring the imagination and bring all that to the audience.”

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kbancroft@sltrib.com

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Just saw School of Rock at Tuacahn and it was FABULOUS! So many great kid musicians! WOW! Highly recommend this show!

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