



Violin prodigy Christie Jeter found her muse in children's musical theater

“Really, I wanted to be Madonna, but that job was taken.”



MARY ANN THOMAS ✓

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

mthomas@post-gazette.com

MAY 2, 2024

5:30 AM

Christie Jeter takes out the trash before telling 22 students rehearsing Disney’s “Frozen Jr.” to put on their silly hats to loosen up.

It’s just another day at the Jeter Backyard Theater, where musical theater dreams can come true, along with some well-honed communication skills.

Jeter’s dream of teaching musical performance resides in a restored 125-year-old barn in Pine Township, where one hallway is filled with trophies and photos of students performing.

“My dreams have come true,” she said. “They are not necessarily the dreams I thought I had.”

Jeter, 55, who has been nominated for a 2024 Tony Award for educational excellence, is the theater’s founding artistic director.

She was directing students last weekend as they rehearsed for the [Junior Theater Festival Europe](#) in England later this month.

Jeter's casting table is a cross between the movie "A Few Good Men" — "You can't handle the truth!" — and her version of Las Vegas' old marketing slogan: "What happens here stays here."

Through the years, at least 10 of her students have performed in Broadway shows or tours or acted in films.

The success hasn't gone to anyone's head, especially Jeter, who still cleans the studio and is present at all rehearsals.

"They know they will see my face at the door and they are going to learn something."

The theater is about much more than star-making.

"About 1% of our students work in film or on the stage," Jeter said. "But 100% come out as empathetic and productive human beings in the world."

The theater provides opportunities beyond acting and singing.

"How do you greet someone and look someone in the eye? These things have gone by the wayside," Jeter said. "These are important life soft skills that are needed to get into doors and are fostered by an acting class and performance."

The theater offers more shows per year, 8-10, than many local performing arts organizations while also competing at national and international events.

"Most parents want their children in a productive activity, especially with communications during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. A lot of those kids lost their sparkle for communications," Jeter said.

Some kids come year-round, others just for the summer. The theater enrolls at least 400 students a year.

"I wanted to create a program where people could get the experience of musical theater with collaboration, risk-taking, responsibility and creativity," she said. "I wanted this for my own kids."

One of Jeter's first backyard students was Robin Elrod, 34, of West View, the former director of communications for Pittsburgh Cultural Trust and current principal marketing manager for Twilio, an international communications company.

"Christie shaped me into loving the arts," she said.

"I loved performing. It was never my plan to pursue it professionally but to stay in touch with Christie and teach there," she said.

"She's really empathetic. Christie dives into what students are passionate about and their skills."

For 33 years, Jeter's job has been working with arts students, first as the choir director and musical director at Riverview School District and then as a private music teacher and founder of her own theater group.

Growing up in North Versailles, Jeter was a musical prodigy who began playing the violin at age 4, the same age she started kindergarten.

There was plenty of inspiration; relatives operated the former dinner theater Sherwood Forest Theatre in Murrysville.

She said her family didn't have extra money for music education. Her first violin was rented.

"My teachers understood that and took me under their wings," she said.

"All those experiences taught me to dream and the importance of teachers investing in their students," Jeter said. "That is why I provide opportunities for students including need-based scholarships. That was done for me."

While in East Allegheny Junior High School in the summer of 1985, Jeter was appointed to Pennsylvania Governor's School for the Arts, majoring in music and theater.

Other school districts and organizations sometimes hired Jeter as a "ringer" because she could read a piece of music and instantly play it.

"I would make \$50 and for me, that was like \$500 in middle and high school," she said.

“Really, I wanted to be Madonna, but that job was taken. I needed to get into a school that allowed me to do composition.”

She snagged a full scholarship to Berklee College of Music in Boston. There, she worked in the recording studio and played in shows with visiting musical icons such as Dizzy Gillespie, Quincy Jones, George Martin and B.B. King.

“It was a great honor to play for them onstage and play their music,” Jeter said.

She graduated in 1991 with pop star Phil Collins as the keynote speaker and honorees, including Atlantic Records founder Ahmet Ertegun and jazz vocalist Al Jarreau.

“Teach them well, Love,” Collins said to Jeter as he handed her a diploma for a bachelor’s degree in music education and composition.

While Jeter wanted to be a performer and a songwriter, her parents advised her to add music teaching to her studies. She was later grateful for that advice.

“I learned I was a terrible songwriter. It’s not my gift,” she said, noting that she did manage to sell a jingle for a cleaning product.

When she had to teach in public schools for her degree requirement, she found her muse.

She no longer dreamed of playing in an orchestra or being Madonna.

“My gift is seeing the gifts in other people. I am not going to be the best violinist in the world but I can teach kids about their impact on the world,” she said.

“From the first time I started teaching at Riverview, I never stopped even after I had babies and later was diagnosed with arthritis.”

She still performs in her local church and used to play occasionally at a dueling piano bar in Station Square.

Established in 2006, the Jeter Backyard Theater has humble roots, as its name implies.

After she got married, Jeter left her Riverview teaching job and moved to Michigan, where she gave private violin, piano and voice lessons and became certified in Kindermusik and Suzuki music education for children.

She returned to Pittsburgh in 2001 with her husband and young children and continued to give private music lessons.

In her Treesdale neighborhood, Jeter quickly accumulated 75 students for various music lessons.

“Every year, I had a big recital and it became bigger and bigger,” she said.

Jeter wrote a modernized version of Cinderella, one of her favorite stories, bypassing the licensing expense for a public musical performance. They held rehearsals in Jeter’s backyard, living room, driveway and garage.

She moved her rehearsal space in 2010 to an old apple orchard barn in Treesdale, where the building’s owner became a fan and eventually sold it to Jeter.

Also that year, as a result of Jeter’s theater winning national and international competitions, she was tapped as a Music Theatre International Freddie G. (Gershon) Fellow. She was among eight directors chosen nationally for master classes in New York City.

That led Jeter to direct pilot music and stage productions for MTI and Disney for the high school market, including such favorites as “Frozen Jr.,” “Frozen Kids” and “Freaky Friday.”

Last year, Jeter was hired to teach acting and to direct in Auckland, New Zealand, and New Castle, Australia.

“Christie exemplifies the passion, dedication and talent needed to help the next generation of young artists truly flourish,” Jason Cocovinis, MTI’s marketing director, said via email.

Jeter’s theater group slogan is: “Work hard. Play often. Give back.”

Although the theater doesn’t have nonprofit status, any extra money from productions goes to local nonprofits, Jeter said.

The fees students pay, typically between \$250 and \$395 including some scholarships, go into expenses for costumes, licensing rights and

performance venue rental.

Jeter said she hasn't taken a salary in five years. Additionally, she and her mother sew many of the costumes, which they then rent to other production companies. Their "Frozen" costumes were used in England and Australia last year.

"I do it because it's important and, luckily, I have a husband who pays the mortgage," she said.

Jeter works with children with a range of abilities. There is no advertising, just word of mouth.

Loren Prisuta, 15, a freshman at Pine-Richland High School, has appeared in well over 30 shows and has been a student of Jeter's since she was 5. Last year, she performed for the national tour of "Hits! the Musical," including a show at the Benedum Center in Downtown.

"I love it," she said. "Theater is part of who I am."

Loren said Jeter really cares about her students.

"Here it's like a second family," she said.

Jeter's goal is to make kids feel comfortable to have the confidence to take risks.

"What I'm doing is changing more lives than playing the pit in New York."

Mary Ann Thomas: mthomas@post-gazette.com

First Published: May 2, 2024, 5:30 a.m.

Updated: May 2, 2024, 1:29 p.m.

Popular in the Community

AdChoices 

Sponsored

