

# Stagedoor Manor Turns 30

THE VENERABLE PERFORMING ARTS "CAMP" HAS INTRODUCED SEVERAL OF HOLLYWOOD'S MOST RECOGNIZED NAMES TO THE BUSINESS

BY ADAM MORENO

IT'S SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT: Stagedoor Manor is not a camp. *It isn't?* Not even close. *But what about all the traditional summer camp activities at Stagedoor, like Stage Combat, Scene Study, Costume Design, Improvisation and Film Production?* Yes, Stagedoor does offer a few standard "camp-y" favorites. But in reality, it's much more. *What about the conservatory-level training in dance, voice and speech? What about the audition process, the awards ceremony and the*

*50-plus plays and musicals that are produced every summer? Okay, there may be a few similarities to the old-fashioned, lakeside camp your dad attended. But that's it. What about the endless parade of agents, managers and casting directors who caravan from New York City with hopes of signing the next Natalie Portman? And what about the daily deification of Sondheim? Maybe you're right... Stagedoor is just a camp.*

When I first attended the celebrated theatrical training center founded by Carl and Elsie Samuelson in 1975, the old girl was barely seven. Located in the quaint, alpine village of Loch Sheldrake, Stagedoor is nestled at the foot of New York's awe-inspiring Catskill Mountains. Too much? You say the Catskills are merely a bland belt of borscht? Perhaps, but the Stagedoor experience was steep, craggy and exhilarating, nonetheless.

As Stagedoor celebrates its 30th anniversary ("pearl", for all you gift-givers), **MovieMaker** has asked me to uncover the secrets behind the "Stagedoor Mafia" (a term coined by Jon Cryer). I rounded up a cadre of esteemed staff and alumni, in search of the truth.

My panel:

▪ **Cindy Samuelson (CS):** Owner/director of Stagedoor. When her father, Carl, passed away last spring, Cindy took over the family business.

▪ **David Quinn (DQ):** Co-owner of Zaring Cioffi Entertainment, a celebrity/sports marketing firm, and king of Stagedoor alumni.

▪ **Shawn Levy (SL):** Director. After a string of breakout hits, including *Just Married*, *Cheaper By the Dozen* and his highly anticipated reenvisioning of *The Pink Panther* with Steve Martin, Levy is one of the most sought-after directors in Hollywood.

▪ **Wendy Braff (WB):** Screenwriter. The former staff writer for "Growing Pains" sold her first feature screenplay, *The Governess*, to

Columbia Pictures in 2003. She has recently completed her fourth script and *The Governess* goes into production this fall.

▪ **Jen Rudin (JR):** Director of casting for Walt Disney Feature Animation. She recently cast the CGI opus *Chicken Little*, due in November.

▪ **Josh Charles (JC):** Actor. Aside from starring in TV's "Sports Night" and the films *Dead Poet's Society*, *S.W.A.T.* and the upcoming *Four Brothers*, Charles recently collaborated with yours truly (and two other Stagedoor alums) on a mockumentary called *Zog's Place*, about a deranged Manhattan hermit.

**Adam Moreno (MM):** *Why has this east coast theater camp churned*

Actress Natalie Portman puts on a show at Stagedoor Manor.



*out so many successful Hollywood professionals?*

**CS:** Our kids feel accepted. Tall, short, fat, big nose... there's a part for you.

**MM:** *I was all of those things.*

**DQ:** We all were. When you're 12, dealing with the pains of adolescence, your parents' divorce, whatever... you get to "camp" and an overly enthusiastic drama teacher tells you that you're "Superhuman", you're immediately filled with confidence and inspiration.

**JR:** When you're that passionate at such a young age, you need a place to go.

**SL:** We were surrounded by people who were similarly driven—untainted motivation.

**WB:** We were free-range theater geeks.



Stagedoor alum and actress Helen Slater

**JC:** That's true. The Frenchwoods (rival theater camp) kids were kept in rusty cages, while we had solid, birch wood bunk beds.

**MM:** How does that passion translate into Hollywood success?

**WB:** Learning what it's like to work on a production from beginning to end, being completely immersed in a project... teaches you artistic responsibility.

**JC:** Because the kids are all so determined, the discipline comes without a struggle. We wanted to get better.

**SL:** When the sun's going down and I still have four setups to shoot—sure, the budgets are bigger—but I learned how to handle that pressure at camp.

**CS:** A performer that knows how to learn their lines, take direction and can appreciate all the different aspects of performing, they're going to bring a lot more to the table.

**JR:** We were subjected to intense competition at such a young age. You had to be disciplined; I have taken that into every single aspect of my job.

**DQ:** People who are passionate about the arts continue to evolve. Our kids go into the business with so much confidence. "I was Stella in *Streetcar* at 14—you can't stop me!"

**MM:** I was *Blanche* at 11, but who's counting? What about the idea of a

*Stagedoor Mafia*? Did anyone from *Loch Sheldrake* help you up the ladder?

**WB:** When I got to LA, Mark Saks [head of casting at CBS and former Stagedoor camper, teacher and director] looked out for me so much. He couldn't have helped me more.

**JR:** Donna Morong [senior VP of casting at Walt Disney and former Stagedoor faculty] is my mentor. Plus, I just cast Zach Braff as *Chicken Little*!

**DQ:** I'm helping you write this article.

**JC:** I helped David come up with that line.

**CS:** I look forward to seeing you all at the reunion.

**MM:** Notice, she didn't say "camp" reunion. Happy anniversary, Stagedoor. Enjoy your thirties!

"Learning what it's like to work on a production from beginning to end teaches you artistic responsibility."

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