



Q&A with **MARK SLAVKIN,** Director of Education @ The Wallis

Q: IN JOINING THE WALLIS, YOU HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO PLAN A NEW MIX OF EDUCATION PROGRAMS. WHAT INFORMED YOUR VISION?

A: I've tried to keep two criterion in mind. First, what arts education programs does Los Angeles need that do not already exist? Second, what is the unique "value-added" that we can bring to the table? In general, this has meant offering new programs for young artists to create original work and providing special opportunities to engage with the artists we present on our stages. We want our educational goals and valued embedded in all that we do, and not cast off to the side.

Q: WHAT ARE SOME SPECIFIC EXAMPLES?

A: The Wallis cares about all aspects of musical theater. Yet we know young people already have many chances to perform musical theater in our region. In contrast, there are few programs that teach the process of creating an original musical. So these past two

seasons we have offered a program called Creating Musical Theater: A Collaborative Lab. High school and college age youth work in teams to develop original ten-minute musicals. Along the way, they see performances here like *Guys and Dolls* or *Merrily We Roll Along*. They also get a chance to meet the legendary Stephen Schwartz and attend the workshops he leads here with the ASCAP Foundation.

Q: WHAT DID IT MEAN FOR THE STUDENTS TO MEET STEPHEN SCHWARTZ?

A: It was transformative. Our students struggle sometimes with the give and take required in the creative process. Just when they felt their shows were "finished," they saw that a director and actors bring new perspectives to the table that also need to be addressed. This can feel like their work is not being truly respected. Then they met Stephen Schwartz and heard him say in one of the workshops "the first time my work is staged, I want to throw up."

But he went on to explain why it is essential to remain open to the good ideas of your partners and collaborators. This validation and advice was essential for them to hear.

Q: HOW ELSE DO YOU INVOLVE THE ARTISTS ON YOUR STAGES?

A: Making these connections is one of the best parts of my job. Sometimes they are scheduled and formalized, such as the upcoming master class with the Jose Limon Dance Company March 25. Last season we hosted a mix of similar events with other amazing artists like Suzanne Farrell, Judith Jamison, Patti LuPone, Arturo Sandoval, and Denzel Washington. Sometimes special opportunities emerge at the last minute leading to magical moments for our students. Last year Christine Ebersole dropped in on our musical theater students to challenge them to make great work because "the arts can change lives." After singing "Defying Gravity" during the culminating of their musical theater camp here, students from The Miracle Project were thrilled to find out Nicole Parker, a real life Elphaba on Broadway, was in the audience. She came up on stage and sang with three young women with disabilities. It was so moving to hear the lyrics of that song take on new meaning: "I'm through accepting limits 'cause someone says they're so. Some things I cannot change. But till I try I'll never know."

Q: WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE FUTURE?

A: Like most three year olds, The Wallis is far from being fully formed. But we know education is core to our mission and we will strive to value and treat young people as full members of this community of artists. For example, as our new Wallis Youth Theater Company continues to evolve, I know they really appreciate the support we are able to provide them. In the months ahead, it will be wonderful to connect them with some of the world's great theater artists coming to perform here.

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