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‘Places, Everyone’: First for a Catering Firm, and Then on an Unlikely Stage

By JIM DWYER | January 24, 2012

Like so many great and fully implausible schemes, a two-nights-only production of “Into the Woods,” running this week on the Lower East Side, was hatched in a crevice of time, when its masterminds were madly busy with other things.

In their case, that was serving dinner and drinks to about 500 people one night last March in Gotham Hall, an old bank building near Pennsylvania Station that has become a catering venue. Kevin Horne — actor, director, writer — was working at the party as a captain for the catering company, Great Performances. Aubrey Elson — actress and singer — was working as a waiter.

During a break, Ms. Elson sidled up to another waiter, Nick Locilento, actor, singer, dancer.

“Kevin and I were talking about putting on ‘Into the Woods,’ ” she said. “What would you think about playing the Baker part?”

“Sure,” Mr. Locilento said instantly.

Casting had begun. So, too, had a mighty project, unmoored from the ordinary ballast of life, with no investors, no salaries, no prospects of anyone’s making a dime: a bubble of joy, with a life span of Tuesday through Wednesday night. They got backing from hundreds of people, in scores of ways — including \$25 donations, discounted rentals and a volunteer electrician.

Within a few weeks, Mr. Horne and Ms. Elson found 23 people to play Cinderella, Rapunzel, Jack (of the beanstalk) and, among others, birds, princes, witches and wolves. That part was simple enough: their employer, Great Performances, was founded in 1979 as a company where artists could get flexible part-time work that paid reasonably well.



Although hundreds of performers have worked there — including famous alumni like Marcia Gay Harden, Tom Sizemore and Chris Noth — there has never been an occasion that brought a big group of them onstage.

“They’ve never gone this way to produce a show,” said Liz Neumark, who started and runs the company.

The business is a perfect fit for performers. Ms. Elson, who grew up near Los Angeles, said she was taking a break from a nine-month national tour with “Cats” when a girlfriend suggested that she work for a few months at Great Performances.

Mr. Locilento, who has worked there since 1998, says that he will go out of town with a show for a

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few months, and, two weeks before the end of a run, he will let the company know that he will be back in the city. "I've finished a show on a Sunday and been back catering on Monday," he said.

Both lines of work run on the same demanding clockwork, Mr. Horne said. They each have "call times," when the performers must show up for work and get into costume; there is a countdown for each stage of preparation, with caterers working to a "room ready" time, when all the places must be set, the bar stations fully stocked and waiters ready to hoist platters.

Often enough, Mr. Horne said, the same command of "Places" is used to summon everyone before the curtain goes up on a meal or a musical.

Getting to issue that command for "Into the Woods" was much more complicated than tapping people on the shoulder and asking them to perform.

"It's crazy what a beast it is," Ms. Elson said. "I had no idea. Kevin is amazing."

One venue fell through. Someone promised another place, then flaked out. Money came with unexpected strings. Ms. Neumark helped organize the insurance. The shows were planned as a benefit for Sylvia Center, a nonprofit project that teaches city children about where food comes from. That helped the group get a discounted price for the performance rights, which are controlled by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, its creators.

Finally, Mr. Horne turned to Kickstarter, the crowd-sourced online fund-raising operation for creative

projects. They had to reach \$10,000 within three weeks. At the end, they had \$12,130.

"People I hadn't seen since high school gave," Ms. Elson said, dazzled by the breadth of the giving. "My sisters sent e-mails harassing people. At the end, it's a huge group accomplishment."

Tickets are \$25 for the show, which is being performed at the Flamboyant Theater of the CSV Cultural Center on the Lower East Side.

On Monday night, they held a dress rehearsal.

A few minutes before 8, someone called the backstage command.

"Places."

James R. Robinson, the narrator, stepped onto the stage to speak the ancient words of beginning, his voice cutting through the air, like a paddle dipped in a river to start a journey.

"Once," he said, "upon a time."

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