

THEATER

Hey Gang, Let's Put on a 'Rocky Horror Show'

By CAMPBELL ROBERTSON APRIL 13, 2007

An interesting thing about the perky redhead playing Janet in the benefit concert performance of "The Rocky Horror Show" at the American Airlines Theater Monday night: She's not only the lead actress, but get this, she's also the event's producer. Oh, and there's another thing, something that even many of the performers in the show don't know.

"She's 18 years old?" asked Kevin Cahoon, who is starring as Dr. Frank 'N' Furter. "I didn't know that."

It's true: Rachel Helson, a freshman at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, is 18. Also, this is her third production. She put on two previous performances of "The Rocky Horror Show" in Louisville, Ky., in 2004 and 2005, both benefits for Susan G. Komen for the Cure, a foundation that supports breast cancer research.

The first one she produced when she was 15. It raised \$12,000.

Perky is almost too mild a word for Ms. Helson. (Her email messages are signed, "Have a gorgeous day!") And though her weekly schedule is crammed with 30 hours of class and studio time, plus homework, and this enormous undertaking, she seems as tired as a hummingbird.

Ms. Helson has always been a theater baby, starting her stage career in an Elementary school production of "Cinderella," then performing in productions at the Walden Theater in Louisville and even coming to New York to study theater during summers in high school.

But in July 2004, two weeks after the fourth of her aunts received a diagnosis of breast cancer, Ms. Helson decided she would organize a benefit for a breast cancer awareness group, and she wrote the Komen foundation saying as much.

"We thought, 'Oh, how cute, this little girl' — who was 15 at the time — 'wants to do a play for us,'" said Stacey Hallahan, the president of the Louisville chapter of Komen for the Cure.

Within six weeks Ms. Helson had started a production company, booked a 619 seat theater at the Kentucky Center for the Arts, engaged corporate sponsors, lined

up the rights to “The Rocky Horror Show,” wrangled the talent, sold the tickets, put on the show for one night and raised that \$12,000. (She did have some help from her parents and her director, Gil Donovan Reyes, who was 25 at the time.)

It turned out to be the largest generator of revenue for the local Komen chapter outside of events organized by the chapter itself. That is, until the next year, when Ms. Helson’s production raised \$25,000.

“Nobody hands us checks this big,” Ms. Hallahan said.

True, the Helsons are somebodies in Louisville. Her father, Timothy, is the president of Golden Brands, a company that processes vegetable oils into shortening. Her mother, Jan, is the executive vice president. The couple also run a development corporation. This was Rachel’s project — she hatched the idea, wrote the letters and made the phone calls — but their connections didn’t hurt.

Then Ms. Helson got into N.Y.U. And decided to stage the benefit for a third time. On Broadway.

“While I was here, I thought, ‘You know, why not?’ ” she said over coffee at the Knickerbocker Bar and Grill in the Village.

The commercial theater landlords turned her down, but the nonprofit Roundabout Theater Company regularly rents its houses, and, after lining up “Prelude to a Kiss,” which is now playing there, Roundabout agreed to rent the 740-seat theater to Ms. Helson’s production company for one night.

At around \$17,000, the theater rental is practically the only expense.

Responding to Ms. Helson’s persistent pleading via email, Richard O’Brien, the author of “The Rocky Horror Show,” gave her permission to produce a concert version in New York and waived the licensing fee. Almost all the talent is donated: the makeup and hair people, for example, are volunteers, flying in from a salon in Louisville.

As for the cast, Ms. Helson, by simply sending email messages to agents, managers, promotional Web sites and just about any other address she could find, lined up some names, at least in theater circles.

In addition to Mr. Cahoon, the production features Kate Reinders (“Good Vibrations,” “Wicked”) and Neil Patrick Harris, a last minute replacement as the narrator. Mr. Reyes, the director, is flying in on Saturday to run rehearsals all weekend (and is showing serious stamina in his own right: less than three weeks from today he will be getting a kidney transplant).

So far, Ms. Helson said, the event has raised \$29,000 in ticket sales and an additional \$33,000 in corporate sponsorship.

That sort of accomplishment is not terribly common as a freshman extracurricular activity, said Mary Schmidt Campbell, the dean of the Tisch School of the Arts.

“From my experience I don’t know of another student anywhere who has produced a show on Broadway,” Ms. Campbell said. Students at Tisch are by nature ambitious, she added, but “in terms of the scale of her ambition, this rates up there 10 plus.”

“The Rocky Horror Tribute Show” will be presented on April 16 at the American Airlines Theater, 227 West 42nd Street; (212) 7191300.

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