A Note from Skylight Artistic Director, Michael Unger

There cannot be a better time to present this musical than now. We are, yet again, at a point in our history when the youth of our country are succeeding as the engines of change on issues that affect them directly. I firmly believe we are all better for the efforts of these brave teenagers across America who, like the newsies of 120 years ago, are teaching us adults a thing or two. We also welcome to our stage these talented, local high school and middle school performers, playing historical characters their own age, which brings a vital exuberance and authenticity to this true story.

Michael Unger
Artistic Director

Newsies – from Headlines to Movies to Stage

In 1899, the Newsboys Strike in New York City was big news. Walt Disney Pictures brought the story to the big screen in 1992 as Newsies, a musical comedy-drama, based on the real-life story of newsboys strike of 1899. The movie was a box office bomb, but like the tough news kids it depicts, it didn’t just curl up and go away. Instead it found its way to home video gaining a huge cult following. In part, driven by the fans, and Disney smelling more opportunities, they adapted the film into a musical stage production with a score by Alan Menken, lyrics by Jack Feldman, and book by Harvey Fierstein, some of Broadway’s biggest names. The story comes to life with rousing songs including: “Carrying the Banner”, “The World Will Know”, “Seize the Day”, “Something to Believe In”, and “Once and for All”.

Newsies made its Broadway debut in 2012, where it played more than 1,000 performances receiving eight Tony Award nominations, with wins for Outstanding Choreography and Outstanding Music. A national tour followed (2014) and the show remains popular in theater companies across the country.

Skylight is pleased to bring this fun and inspiring story to our audiences. Come along and cheer on our feisty newsies as they discover that fighting for what’s right can make you a winner.
I love this show. I love its music. I love its message. And I love how popular it’s become. Its popularity gives me hope.

I was 14 when the 1992 movie version was released, and I was obsessed. I was the target audience, and my teenage self could not have been happier at a movie. I didn’t realize at the time that the stunning singing and dancing in the film was turning me into an activist, but Disney is clever like that.

The Newsboys Strike of 1899 may have been at the turn of the century but it doesn’t feel far away. The way these young people stand up and say, “Listen to me!” is happening right now, all across the globe. Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai, the Parkland Students. The list is long. Young people are paying attention. And they deserve a seat at the table.

Newsies is not a nostalgia piece. Its contemporary resonance is palpable, and its inspirational power speaks straight to today’s headlines. Thank you for joining us for this brilliant piece of musical theater that packs a message of protest and persistence. I hope this show gets you fired up to make change and to trust in the next generation. We need them now desperately.

A note from Director, Molly Rhode

Clothes can tell stories, and hopefully when you see Newsies and the clothes the actors utilize, you’ll see a story reflective of 120 years ago, but also how relevant the plight of these working children still is. Director Molly Rhode and I decided that it would interesting to frame our story with folks in modern dress, letting us know that these stories still matter and that we should not see time period as a divide. As such, we meet our principle players essentially dressed as themselves, the actor. During the overture we will watch them pull costumes and start to take on personas, through some theatre magic we will then start to fade into our time period of 1899. I’m excited to see audience reactions to this as I think it is a unique approach to this story that we haven’t seen, and it’s always exciting to find a new way into a popular show.

Another reason we thought to incorporate modern clothing items is simply because the actual silhouette and style of the working newsboy in 1899 isn’t particularly that different from what you might see worn by a college student living in Riverwest. Work pants & knickers (represented by stretch jeans), rough work shirts (here in chambray and flannel), ankle boots (we’ve done Converse High Tops), neckerchiefs and caps are all seen today out in the world with some regularity. By folding in some period elements, we hopefully get a fun cross-period Newsies in which young people in the audience can essentially see themselves up on the stage.

That isn’t to say there aren’t some stunning period gowns and suits built by our excellent costume department here at Skylight, but they might have some fun cross period twists as well!

A note from Costume Designer, Jason Orlenko

Early cover illustration for the Milwaukee Newsboys’ publication, “Newsboys World” from March of 1916. Children in Urban America Project. www.marquette.edu

For more historical information about Milwaukee’s Newsboys’ Republic visit the website for Marquette University’s ‘Children in Urban America Project’: https://bit.ly/32oShQn

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Joseph Pulitzer (1847 – 1911) was one of the most influential figures in the American journalism in the late 19th century. A Hungarian immigrant, he became the owner and publisher of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch and later the New York World, which he transformed into one of the leading papers in the country. The World at first was losing $40,000 but Pulitzer turned its fortune around, in part, by publishing sensational stories. Pulitzer started out as a reporter, himself, working 16 hours a day. In spite of his depiction in Newsies, Pulitzer supported organized labor, attacked trusts and monopolies, and exposed political corruption. He was politically active, socially responsible and involved in many community causes such as bringing the Statue of Liberty to New York and founding the Columbia University School of Journalism with a philanthropic bequest. Today, his name is best remembered as the founder of the Pulitzer Prize, the most prestigious award in American journalism.

William Randolph Hearst (1863 – 1951) dominated journalism for nearly a half century. He entered the publishing business. In 1887, after being given control of The San Francisco Examiner by his wealthy father. He moved to New York City and acquired the New York Journal. His flamboyant methods of journalism, which emphasized sensationalism and human interest stories, influenced the nation's popular media. Hearst's papers featured giant headlines and illustrations with lurid stories of crime, corruption and innuendo. Acquiring more newspapers, he later expanded to magazines, creating the largest newspaper and magazine business in the world. He was twice elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. He ran for President of the United States in 1904 but did not win. His life was the inspiration for the title character in Orson Welles's film, Citizen Kane.
A Seasoned Creative Team

Alan Menken: (Composer) Conductor, director, composer, songwriter and record producer Alan Menken is best known for his scores for films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios, including The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty and the Beast (1991), Aladdin (1992), and Pocahontas (1995)—each of which won him two Academy Awards. He also composed the scores for Little Shop of Horrors (1982), Newsies (1992), The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1996), Hercules (1997), Home on the Range (2004), Enchanted (2007), and Tangled (2010), among others. Other Broadway hits include A Christmas Carol (1994) and Sister Act (2009). With eight Academy Award wins (four for Best Score and four for Best Song),

Jack Feldman: (Lyricist) The prolific Feldman has written songs for television, film, and Broadway. He has worked on many Disney movies ranging from Oliver & Company (1988) to The Lion King II: Simba’s Pride (1995). He wrote the lyrics for Barry Manilow's Grammy Award–winning song “Copacabana” and won a Tony along with Alan Menken for the stage musical version of Newsies.

Harvey Fierstein: (Book) His distinctive, gravelly voice is just one of Harvey Fierstein’s claims to fame. The actor, playwright, and voice actor has won four Tony Awards: two in 1983, as Best Actor (Play) and Author for Best Play for Torch Song Trilogy. He recreated his performance in the film version of the same title in 1988. His third Tony was in 1992 for Play for Tinkerbell. His fourth Tony was in 2003, as Best Actor in a Musical for Hairspray.

Extra! Extra!
The Real Newsies Story!

In 1899, the streets of New York City echoed with the voices of an estimated 10,000 newsboys and girls. Most were poor orphans, homeless and runaways whose only means of survival was the money they made from selling newspapers for a penny a “papo”. The kids weren’t employed by the newspaper but instead had to buy copies from the publisher, then sell them independently. The publishers wouldn’t buy back unsold copies and to add to their plight, the newsies had to set aside enough money to buy papers to sell the next day. So making as many sales as possible was a must, often leading to very aggressive tactics with the newsboys yelling, pushing and pandering to potential customers.

The main players in this lopsided game were the two major newspapers—The New York World, owned by Joseph Pulitzer and The New York Journal owned by William Randolph Hearst—the two most powerful men in the city. To make it harder for the kids to eke out a living, Pulitzer and Hearst got into a circulation war to increase their profits. But instead of employee layoffs and salary cuts, they decided to raise the price the newsies paid from 50 cents to 60 cents for bundles of 100 papers. The newsies found this to be incredibly unfair and they retaliated.

Milwaukee played a leadership role in advocating for newsboys’ rights as early as the 1900s, and later with the establishment of a Newsboys’ Republic in Milwaukee Public Schools, guided by a teacher. The program progressed to include the Newsboys’ World, the Knights of the Canvas Bag, and scholarships.

Most important, the newsies and the musical Newsies sends a message to us all: You can make a difference if you hold fast to your beliefs.

On a hot summer day in July of 1899, thousands went on strike refusing to sell newspapers published by Pulitzer and Hearst. The strike expanded across the Brooklyn Bridge blocking traffic for several days. The strikers also distributed flyers and hung signs around the city encouraging people to help their cause by not buying the World and Journal. The newspapers responded by hiring strike-breakers—sometimes called scabs—as replacement workers. That often led to street fights that had to be broken up by the police. Meanwhile, there were rallies that turned out more than 5,000 newsies. The crowds were revved up with speeches given by the leader of the strike, Kid Blink, named because he was blind in one eye and wore an eye patch. Some newspapers mocked his strong Brooklyn accent when quoting him. He was famous for telling the strikers: “Friens and feller workers. Dis is a time which tries de hearts of men. Dis is de time when we’se got to stick together like glue.... We know wot we wants and we’ll git it even if we is blind.”

The strike did have an impact. After a few weeks, the publishers agreed to buy back unsold newspapers, a practice still employed today, though they did not scale back to the original price. But their biggest victories were yet to come. The strike paved the way for other newsies unions across the country to protest against injustices. And decades later, it opened the door to improved child labor practices with work hours, age limitations, working conditions, and quality of life in other industries as well.

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