

# 'You got

By Kay Peterson

IT'S EIGHT O'CLOCK in the morning in Chicago, and Jamibeth Margolis has a long day ahead of her. As a casting director for Johnson-Liff Casting Associates, Ltd., of New York, Margolis handles some of the biggest musicals, helping to cast the Broadway and national touring companies of *Les Misérables* and *Cats*, as well as a new West End musical, *Napoleon*.

Today she's managing an out-of-town call to find new dancers and singers for *Cats*, so her morning starts early. Arriving at the site two hours before auditions, Margolis rallies her stage managers—locals she's hired to help handle the logistics—and prepares for the flood of performers who will soon appear. The audition rooms need to be checked, signs posted, doors unlocked, actors signed in—all before the actual casting starts and the *other* half of her job can begin.

As an up-and-coming casting director for one of Broadway's major agencies, Margolis has mastered her daily juggling act. Aided by her well-rounded theatre background and a respect for details, she rose from intern to assistant to casting director within three years. This achievement would be impressive in any field, but in the highly competitive profession of musical theatre casting, it's nothing short of amazing. For Margolis, the job is a dream come true, achieved through the hard work of weaving together the skills and knowledge needed to become a "talent expert."

## Paying her dues

Despite her current success, Margolis is the first to admit that the path to her present career has been anything but a straight line. With a background in mu-

*Casting director Jamibeth Margolis with memorabilia from some of the shows she has cast.*



BEN FOGLIETTO/PRESS OF ATLANTIC CITY

# the job!

sic, performing, stage management, and directing, she selected casting as her final career choice, not her first. "A lot of people don't initially decide that they want to be casting directors," she explains. And for a job that requires a well-rounded knowledge of all aspects of theatre, music, and performance, that's probably just as well.

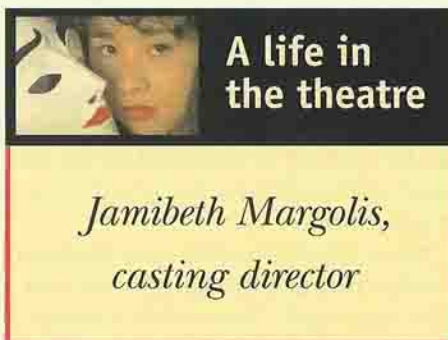
The constant in Margolis's background is her abiding love for theatre and performance. She caught the theatre bug early, while growing up in New Jersey, just a stone's throw from New York—and Broadway. Frequent trips into the city to see musicals exposed her to the shows she grew to love, shows for which she now handles the casting. "I can remember being twelve when *Les Miz* first opened. I thought it was the greatest thing in the world! I waited backstage for everyone's autograph, and in the car on the way home, I memorized every actor, every face, every role."

That early fascination with performance led to a B.A. degree in theatre from Ithaca College. While in college, Margolis dabbled in various aspects of the arts, including directing, music theory and history, conducting, and voice. She also began to establish herself as a professional stage manager, working for three summers with the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival. She spent her junior year of college pursuing her ambition by interning as an assistant stage manager at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey. "I wanted it so badly," Margolis explains, "I couldn't wait to be out there."

Her experience in professional theatre only made her all the more eager to graduate and get on with her career. Margolis returned to Ithaca and completed her degree. Foregoing the festivities of senior week, she grabbed a *New*

*York Times* and hopped a Greyhound bus to start apartment-hunting in New York City. "I only came back for graduation and to pick up my things. I knew I just had to be in New York!" She didn't have to wait long for a break: she got hired as a substitute stage manager for *Smokey Joe's Cafe* on Broadway.

Despite that early success, Margolis wasn't content to stay in stage management. "I realized the thing that I loved most about being a stage manager was working with the actors and being the 'people person' of the company." While she thrived on keeping things organized



and maintaining the lines of communication behind the scenes, she was less interested in some of the stage manager's most basic duties. "I didn't mind being involved in the technical side of theatre, but I knew it wasn't my passion."

The real clincher was job security. "I began to think about my long-term career path. After all, no show runs forever." Not long after graduation, she realized that even well-established stage managers with years of credits under their belts spend a lot of time looking for new work. "I wanted to find a job that would allow me to work on Broadway dealing with musicals, but that had more stability to it—as well as a bit more regular hours."

Finding the right career—and the right opportunity—took time, luck, and research. Margolis had been interested in casting, and began to pay attention to which agencies were responsible for which shows. "I would read the programs for all the shows I loved, and I kept noticing that Johnson-Liff handled the casting. So I knew that was where I wanted to be." (There are about a dozen casting agencies and partnerships working on Broadway shows this season.)

Taking the initiative, Margolis sent her résumé directly to the office, explaining that she was interested in becoming an intern. Even though the internship didn't offer any pay, competition was stiff. And while Margolis was in many ways well qualified, having such a strong résumé in stage management almost became a liability. "I had to give a really good explanation as to why I wanted to switch fields and move into casting. I had to convince them that I was serious and that it wasn't just a whim."

When she finally did land the internship, Margolis was bowled over by the opportunity. Her duties weren't exciting—faxing, filing, alphabetizing photos, copying sides—but the world she was introduced to was. "I was learning then, just by being in the office." She began to see who did what and how work was done on a daily basis in the office, and to identify the big names of business.

Timing was on her side when one of the assistants left the office during Margolis's internship and she was hired to fill the spot. In the new, permanent position, Margolis took on greater responsibilities. "As a full-fledged assistant, you get much more involved in the audition process." Now, it was her duty to set up the auditions, hire the pianists, book the rooms, prepare lists of appointments, and handle the myriad details required

for an audition. "I found my background in stage management really helped because I already knew how to be organized and handle the little details."

In retrospect, she's grateful for her time working as an assistant. "You really shouldn't be a casting director unless you've been an assistant. You learn an immense amount from doing the detail work." She also gained a valuable introduction to the whole round of characters that makes up the world of theatrical casting. "You start dealing with the agents personally, and seeing them deal with others. It's important to know who's going to push and which agents are good for finding specific kinds of performers."

After paying her dues as an assistant for two years, Margolis made her official move into the role of casting director in 1997. She joined the ranks of Johnson-Liff's four other casting directors as the youngest member. With this promotion, she found herself—finally—inside the audition room. Her move from assistant to casting director meant a chance to influence the decisions being made. "As an assistant, you do all the work setting up the auditions, but you never actually get to see them. Once you become a casting director, you're in there with the production team, watching and evaluating the auditions."

## The balancing act

So what does Margolis do in her role as a casting director? The answer isn't as simple as you may think. "I'm always surprised to find a lot of people—even actors—don't really know what a casting director's job entails." Not just the person who says, "You got the job," Margolis's role starts long before an actor opens her mouth to sing and continues after the cast is hired.

In fact, a huge proportion of her work doesn't even take place in the audition room. "A lot of my days are spent in the office," Margolis explains. It's the nerve center of the casting industry, the information clearinghouse that makes finding the right performers possible. At Johnson-Liff, the business day starts at ten o'clock, but most staff members show up a half-hour earlier to get a jump on the day. "It's our only time to touch base with

each other, to organize ourselves and our thoughts on our projects." Once the doors open, the day is taken up with countless business details. "My day can include anything from setting up auditions to going through submissions from agents for roles that are open to answering questions about why an actor wasn't seen."

If a big audition is coming up, then the nitty-gritty details take over. Scheduling and publicizing the audition is the first step. Next, Margolis hires a pianist and fields questions from actors and agents. "Actors need to know as much as possible before the audition. I tell them what to prepare, what the structure of the day will be like. And a lot of the time, they'll want to know who will be in the audition room."

She also communicates with the production team for the show, talking to the director and musical supervisor to see what they need in terms of script sides and music scores. "We put together all the materials in-house, which means a lot of cutting and copying. Someone doesn't come in and do it for us!" If the production team decides to hold an out-of-town audition, Margolis goes through the whole procedure again, including booking the audition facilities and hiring temporary staff, only this time, it's all done long-distance.

When there's time left over, Margolis does her part to keep things in her own office organized. "You wouldn't believe how much filing we do!" she says. The casting business, she explains, is founded on filing. Notes on actors, lists of casts, information to help make future decisions are all kept in a scrupulously organized system. For every audition that's held, detailed notes are kept on each performer. The notes are bound and stored in the office so the casting staff can keep track of each actor's progress. "Our office is filled with notebooks going back for years," Margolis explains. "If you've ever auditioned for our office, we have notes on you."

After a full eight-hour day, the work goes on outside the office as well. There are the hours she logs in the theatre, seeing performance after performance of her own shows as well getting out to see new shows. "When I'm responsible for

## What comes before 'You got the job!'

THE ACTOR IN the audition room only sees one slice of the whole casting process. Jamibeth Margolis enumerates the steps it takes to cast a Broadway musical.

1. The agency is hired to cast the show.

2. Agency staff read the script and talk to the director about casting requirements.

3. A breakdown of the show detailing the vocal and character type of all roles is produced and distributed to theatrical agents and publications.

4. Agency staff sort through the actors' résumés sent in by agents and actors to determine who will be brought in for auditions.

5. Audition appointments are scheduled; actors and agents are contacted. Audition times are confirmed and actors are told what materials to prepare.

6. Preparations are made for the auditions: audition rooms are booked; pianists and stage managers are hired; audition sides are prepared.

7. Open calls are scheduled and publicized.

8. Audition day: actors are heard. Decisions are made about callbacks and additional actors to bring in for further auditions.

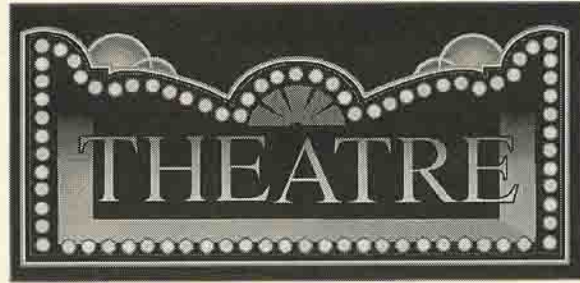
9. At the end of each day, choices are reviewed and discussed, and—eventually—final decisions are made.

10. Job offers are made to the actors who've made the cut.

—K. P.

the casting of a show, I make sure that I attend a lot of performances," Margolis says. As she explains, it's important to keep abreast of how the performance looks and how the cast works together, as well as how individual performers are doing in their roles. It's also important to the casting director's role as part of the show's creative team. "The more familiar

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you are with the show, the more the production team respects your opinion. They can say to you, "You saw so-and-so perform last night. What do you think of her?"

Margolis's role is key in the casting process since she determines which actors the production team sees. "It's my job to narrow the field, to make sure that the production staff is seeing the best possible people for that show in the limited time that they have." That means doing the initial screening by sorting through submissions, calling agents, consulting with other casting directors in her office, or simply trying to remember performers she's seen in recent shows.

It also means sitting through hundreds of auditions at the open call to find the few who make it to callbacks. At the open call, anyone who shows up may audition. Margolis does the initial screening, inviting only a few actors to callbacks in front of the production team. By opening up the field to anyone who's interested, Margolis taps a bigger talent pool while saving time for the director and musical supervisor. "A lot of the time, because we're looking for a particular role or a particular type, a lot of very talented people are not going to get a callback," she said. "That doesn't mean they didn't give good auditions. It doesn't even mean I won't call them back some time in the future. If you audition for me today, and I like you, chances are I'll put you on a list to be seen for another show in the future. So rejection doesn't always add up to automatic discouragement."

When Margolis finally does meet with the production team in the audition room, her role still isn't what most people would expect. "I think the biggest fallacy about casting is that, as casting directors, we actually *do* the casting. Does a casting director ever make a final decision in musical theatre? No." Instead the final decision, like so much in theatre, is the product of collaborative participation by the entire team.

When it comes down to that final decision, Margolis often finds she has some say in who is chosen. "I never have the final say, but I definitely can influence things. The production team often doesn't get out to see as many shows as I do, because they are so busy with their

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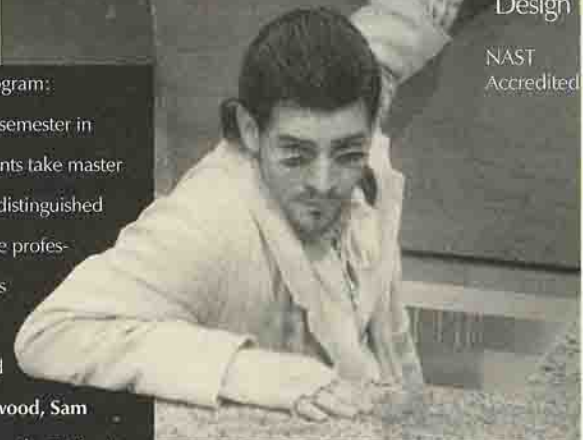
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own show, so I give input on how a specific actor has developed in their recent work and whether I think they can handle the demands of a particular role."

Learning how to give that input has been one of the biggest challenges for Margolis. "When I first started, I thought, 'Wow, these are the pros. I have to agree with everything they say.' But you really don't." Instead, she's learned the importance of having her own say, and she will fight for the actors she really believes in.

Does that mean she ignores the director's opinion? "Not at all. A big part of being a good casting director is learning the taste of the people you are hiring for. So even though I think Dancer A is the best dancer in the world, if her style doesn't match that of the choreographer, she's not going to get the job." But Margolis hangs on to her own opinions nonetheless, because they often come in handy later. "I just write in my notebook, 'Don't bring in Dancer A for this show because so-and-so doesn't respond to her.' Later, I'll bring her in for a different show, and she'll get that job."

Facing a Broadway audition can be a nerve-racking and intimidating experience. But, as Margolis explains, actors shouldn't be intimidated by the casting team, nor discouraged if they aren't hired. "When we're casting a show, we're looking for the person who is right for a particular role *right now*. We want to find the person who can solve our problem; we're not interested in finding out what's wrong with your performance. So we're very supportive of the actors who come in to audition for us."

After the final audition comes the part Margolis loves best: telling an actor she's gotten her a Broadway role. "Whether it's their first or their twentieth, they jump for joy and cry, scream, fall on the floor. It always makes me realize why I love what I do." For Margolis, part of the joy comes from following the actors' careers, tracking their progress, and seeing them finally make it after trying so hard.

"There are people who will come in to audition for a show like *Les Miz* over and over again. Then, after six or seven auditions, they finally get cast. After seeing them grow and develop over that time, it's almost like you've befriended them,

so you like to see them succeed."

Because of her profession, Margolis has a vested interest in the careers of actors. For her, explaining why a given actor *wasn't* right is as important as choosing the right actor. "I spend a lot of time giving feedback to actors and agents about auditions. It's an important duty that I take very seriously."

That's part of why she takes careful notes in the audition room. "In part, it's for my own reference, for when I'm casting another show and I want to see what I thought of someone. But it's also so I can tell that actor how they're doing." She jots down descriptions of voice type ("beautiful tenor to a C," "a covered sound"), notes the person's looks (so she doesn't forget them), and writes feedback comments on how they performed and progressed in the audition and where they need to improve. Margolis continues that support outside the office by teaching a class in musical theatre audition technique. By maintaining this supportive role with actors, she helps to nurture and develop the pool of talent that she draws from. And stronger talent means better casts in the future.

### Bringing it together

With her diverse responsibilities inside and outside of the audition room, Margolis relies daily on her background in the performing arts. She draws on her experience as a stage manager to find ways to keep track of the details. Her training in music allows her to communicate effectively with musical supervisors and actors. Her college-level work as a director gives her insight to the overall needs of a production and allows her to understand the project from the production team's point of view. Similarly, her broad knowledge of music history helps her guide actors when they are choosing pieces for an audition. Her knowledge of theatre history helps her understand the various performance and dance styles directors may be looking for.

For Margolis, taking advantage of opportunities in college to dabble in directing, conducting, stage management, and performance was invaluable. Because of those experiences, she's become a veritable jack-of-all-trades and an asset in the

audition room. "I think the biggest mistake you can make is to focus too narrowly on performance or your specialization when you're in college."

In addition, Margolis advises that theatre students pay attention to their work inside the classroom. "I think there's also a tendency to devalue academics when you are a theatre student. That's a big mistake." She stresses that theatre history, music history, and art history provide an important intellectual and artistic foundation for anyone working in theatre.

Even now, nearly five years after college, her training continues. Being a casting director doesn't mean just knowing how to choose a quality performer or set up an audition. It's about maintaining and constantly developing your knowledge of the arts. Margolis studies *all* aspects of theatre—theatre as an art form, as a part of history, and as a craft. "I still find myself buying plays, buying books. When I have free time, I spend my evenings memorizing musicals—learning

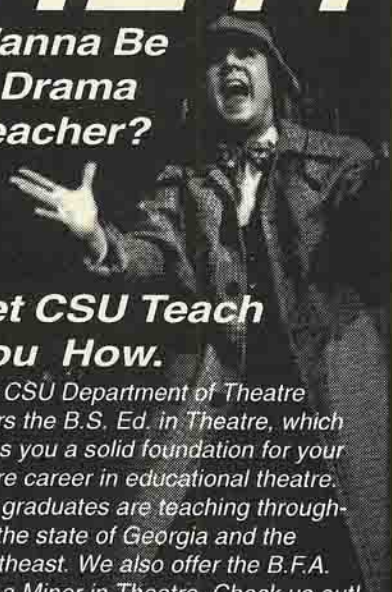
plots, listening to new scores and old classics—so I have that repertoire in my brain. Every day I draw on the information I have: 'Who wrote that play?' 'What is this play about?' 'Who were the important figures during this period?'"

That knowledge helps her do her job better. "You're a good casting director when you're sitting in an audition, and the musical supervisor looks over to you and asks, 'What show is that from?' and


you have the answer. Then you realize you've done your homework. And when you don't have the answer, you realize you still have a lot more homework to do. For me, it's both. I've done a lot of homework, and I have a lot more homework to do."

*Kay Peterson is an editor at www.fastweb.com. She's spent years in the theatre as an actor and dramaturg.*


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