



Contents? Click! ▾

Lifestyle

[2001 Calendar](#)
[Lively Events calendar](#)

En español!



Carabet for kids

By THERESA WINSLOW, Staff Writer

Smack in the middle of "heck week," Joe Thompson stands on a stage bordered by florescent children's handprints. He strums a guitar, alternately singing and issuing dance tips in a kind of controlled chaos.

He's part crossing guard, part balladeer, part day-care administrator. And this is the fourth consecutive summer he's done it all for free.

The Annapolis resident is the creator of "Cabaret for Kids," which opens in its 2001 incarnation Friday night and runs through the weekend. The two-act show features songs, skits and poems with a common focus: the power of imagination.

"Someone once asked me how you handle 30 kids," said Mr. Thompson, whose other full-time job is as a graphic artist at the county Board of Education. "It's like a herd of ponies. You sort of hope they go in the same direction."

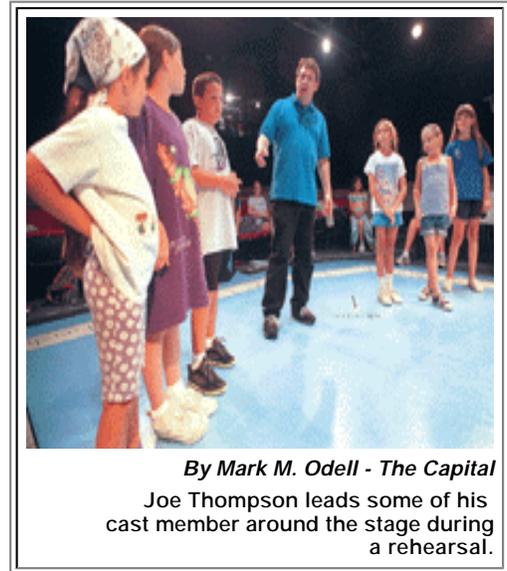
Rehearsals started about a month ago -- three or four times a week for about three hours each day -- but during this week, dubbed "heck week" by Mr. Thompson, practice tends to run even longer.

The 48-year-old is the first to admit the show is a "ton" of work, but it's definitely a labor of love he plans to continue.

"Sometimes I do get overwhelmed, but on opening night, you see how good these kids feel and it's worth it at that point," he said. Show and tell

The show had its genesis several years ago, when Mr. Thompson, who serves on the board of directors of Colonial Players, met with theater officials. Colonial focuses on adult-oriented plays and musicals, and Mr. Thompson wanted the company to do more with children.

"Colonial's not a kids theater," Mr. Thompson said. "But we're a community theater and kids are part of the community."



By Mark M. Odell - The Capital
Joe Thompson leads some of his cast member around the stage during a rehearsal.

"Cabaret for Kids" has used Colonial's facility on East Street in Annapolis since its inception, and the theater-in-the-round setup works well for establishing an intimacy with the audience.

The cast of 30 children range in age from 4 to 18, but most are elementary- and middle-school students involved in theater for the very first time. The cast also includes 10 adults.

Mr. Thompson's two 9-year-old twins, Martin and Leslie, have parts, and his wife, Susie Collins, a former county kindergarten teacher, is the assistant director.

"I'm in the show because if I wasn't, I'd never see my family," Ms. Collins joked.

Many of the other children are Mr. Thompson's former or current neighbors, who grew up listening to him sing the songs his own children inspired.

Maggie Morton, 13, who will be an eighth-grader at Annapolis Area Christian School in the fall, is one example. She used to live near Mr. Thompson, and is now in her second year with the show. Clad in a Superman T-shirt and a white sailor's cap, she spent part of Tuesday night practicing dance moves with schoolmate Lisa Fox, 12, in the lobby of the theater.

"It's fun, but learning your lines takes a little work," Maggie said.

Tiffany Foster, 12, who is going into sixth grade at Georgetown East Elementary, was pretty jazzed about getting on stage in front of an audience for the first time. "I get to say lines," she said, flashing her braces in a wide smile. "Everybody watches me. I'm excited."

Tiffany's in six numbers, so the crowd will get to watch her a lot.

As she spoke, Ann Zolkower of Annapolis, one of Mr. Thompson's adult helpers, completed some paperwork. This year, she's backstage. Last year, she set up a photo exhibit for the show. "Sticky Fingers," about getting stuck to things, is her favorite number in the show.

"(I like) the way Joe interacts with the kids and gets them all excited," she said. "He figures out their strengths and weaknesses. He has an amazing amount of patience. I couldn't do it. I don't have the patience." Awash in ideas

At rehearsal, Mr. Thompson pointedly instructs the pint-sized performers, but never yells and always mixes in jokes.

He started writing children's songs and skits himself because he couldn't find material to his liking.

"There's a lot of inappropriate stuff," he said. "Our culture tries so hard to let them grow up. It's nice to let them be kids and do what they do best -- play and pretend."

Other numbers in the show include "Pirates in the Bath" and "Rock-A-Bye Johnny."

Mr. Thompson said he usually tries songs and skits out at home first, since that's where they originate anyway. "Pirates," for example, came about when his twins didn't want to take a bath and told him pirates had taken over the bathroom.

"Johnny" is a rock-infused lullaby he used to sing to them.

Another pirate skit features "Main Street Pirates," based on a story he used to tell about pirates who got seasick and, as a result, were forced to cruise Annapolis on a boat with wheels.

"People who don't normally get to be silly get to be silly in the show," he said. That should keep the actors -- and the audience -- happy.

- No Jumps-

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