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Their moment on the big stage

September 14, 2005

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For many performers, opening for country music legend Willie Nelson would seem like the chance of a lifetime. But most of the members of the ensembles from the Gallery 37 summer apprenticeship program -- performing at 8 tonight under the umbrella of the larger group After School Matters - - seem more awestruck with the size of the Pritzker Pavilion stage.

"This stage is huge compared to the one at the storefront theater," says 16-year-old Richard Guss, who is performing selections from the musical "Pippin" with the Gallery 37 musical theater ensemble. "You want to look out toward the audience like you're supposed to, but you keep looking instead at the stage.

"It's a lot of work just getting from one part of the stage to the other."

It has also taken Guss and others a lot of work to get to this point. The Gallery 37 summer arts apprenticeship has been around for 15 years, providing training in the culinary, visual and performing arts, including singing, dancing and musical

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theater. The brainchild of Cultural Affairs Commissioner Lois Weisberg and the mayor's wife, Maggie Daley, Gallery 37 was created in 1991 as an arts career training program. Students earn practical artistic experience -- and wages.

"Gallery 37 program is professionally focused," says 17-year-old Robbin Major. "You can't find the type of programs it offers anywhere else."

"I'm not surprised by the level of talent and professionalism," Daley says. "What I *am* is always in awe of it, and have been for 14 years. From day one these teens have showed all of us that this is what they can do.

"I really hold these teens in high esteem. They never let us down."

Anthony Casale, a co-director of the musical theater program, concurs. "The talent in our summer production of 'Pippin' was amazing," Casale says. "A couple of these kids are ready for Broadway."

By just about anyone's accounts, the Gallery 37 program is a success. Representatives from other cities from around the country and the globe have all come here to study the program and emulate it. You'd assume, given the program's reputation, that no one would want to tamper with success.

However, four years ago, Daley had a hand in creating After School Matters as a program within Chicago public schools. In addition to the areas covered by Gallery 37, the program also offers sports and technology-based activities. Like Gallery 37, it also pays its participants small stipends.

But earlier this year, a decision was made to merge the two groups -- something Daley says she planned all along.

"For the first three years, the two similar organizations were kept separate so as not to compromise Gallery 37's success," Daley says. "It was always part of our plan to eventually combine the two programs into one organization."

Currently, the Gallery 37 program is open to Chicago residents ages 14-21. After School Matters programs are only open to kids 14-18 who attend one of the 35 Chicago public schools currently offering them. Rumors began circulating immediately after the announcement that Gallery 37 would soon be forced to adopt the After School Matters rules, shutting out kids from private schools and anyone older than 18.

Daley says she wants to put that idea to rest once and for all. "I'm not sure where those rumors started, but this change should be transparent," she said. "Both organizations will continue to operate under the parameters they always have."

For now, Daley says that although it's been absorbed into the After School Matters program, Gallery 37 isn't going anywhere.

"We will never abandon the downtown Gallery 37 program," Daley says. "We're just going to put that same energy into the After School Matters programs in public high schools all around the city."

Tonight's fund-raiser for After School Matters is by invitation only. However, Chicagoans are welcome to catch the show from the lawn.

To donate to After School Matters, call (312) 742-4182 or visit www.afterschoolmatters.org.



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