



Theater Geek: The Real Life Drama of a Summer at Stagedoor Manor, the Famous Performing Arts Camp

Mickey Rapkin

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What do Natalie Portman, Robert Downey, Jr., Zach Braff, and Mandy Moore have in common? Before they were stars, they were campers at Stagedoor Manor, the premier summer theater camp for children and teenagers. Founded in 1975, Stagedoor continues to attract scores of young performers eager to find kindred spirits, to sing out loud, to become working actors—or maybe even stars.

Every summer for the past thirty-five years, a new crop of campers has come to the Catskills for an intense, often wrenching introduction to professional theater. (The camp produces thirteen full-scale productions during each of its three sessions.) These kids come from varying backgrounds—the offspring of Hollywood players from Nora Ephron to Bruce Willis work alongside kids on scholarship. Some campers have agents, others are seeking representation.

When Mickey Rapkin, a senior editor at *GQ* and self-proclaimed theater fanatic, learned about this place, he fled Manhattan for an escape to upstate New York. At Stagedoor, he tracked a trio of especially talented and determined teen actors through their final session at camp. Enter Rachael Singer, Brian Muller, and Harry Katzman, three high school seniors closing out their sometimes sheltered Stagedoor experiences and graduating into the real world of industry competition and rejection. These veteran campers—still battling childhood insecurities, but simultaneously searching for that professional gig that will catapult them to fame—pour their souls into what might be their last amateur shows.

Their riveting stories are told in *Theater Geek*, an eye-opening, laugh-out-loud chronicle full of drama and heart, but also about the business of training kids to be professional thespians and, in some cases, child stars. (The camp has long acted as a farm system for Broadway and Hollywood, attracting visits from studio executives and casting directors.) Via original interviews with former and current campers and staff—including Mandy Moore, Zach Braff, and Jon Cryer—Rapkin also recounts Stagedoor Manor's colorful, star-studded history: What was Natalie Portman's breakout role as a camper? What big-time Hollywood director, then barely a teenager, dated a much older Stagedoor staff member? Why did Courtney Love (at Stagedoor visiting her daughter) get into an argument with a hot dog vendor who had set up shop at the camp?

Theater Geek leads readers through the triumphs and tragedies of the three senior campers' final summer in an absorbing, thought-provoking narrative that reveals the dynamic and inspiring human beings who populate this world. It also explores what the proliferation of theater camps says about our celebrity-obsessed youth and our most basic but vital need to fit in. Through the rivalry, heartbreak, and joy of one summer at Stagedoor Manor, Rapkin offers theater geeks of all ages a dishy, illuminating romp through the lives of serious child actors. Rich, insightful, and thoroughly entertaining, *Theater Geek* pulls back the curtain on an elite and intriguing world to reveal what's really at its core: children who simply love to perform.

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