

## THINGS TO DO

**'Differently abled' actors put on a show**

Members of the East End Special Players rehearse their new play, which combines improvisation, songs and vignettes. Credit: Morgan Campbell

**By Barbara Schuler**

[Special to Newsday](#)

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“I’m not a social worker. I’m not a therapist,” says Jacqui Leader. “I’m just the director.” But spend a couple hours watching Leader run a rehearsal of the East End Special Players, and it’s clear she’s wrong. She is all those things and more.

Flashing a quick thumbs-up sign, Leader quiets the buzz in the room as the actors get ready to run a scene from their upcoming play, “Turtles on the Tarmac,” which debuts at a benefit performance April 29 at Bay Street Theater in Sag Harbor. Artistic director of the company since 1992, Leader seems to be everywhere at once — adjusting a wobbly tiara one minute, then gently helping an actor who is blind manage her gown up the stairs while almost simultaneously offering reassurance to a newcomer Leader is guiding to his starting position.



Artistic director Jacqui Leader talks with actor Phebe Rogers during rehearsal for "Turtles on the Tarmac," which debuts April 29 at Bay Street Theater. Credit: Morgan Campbell

How Leader, 65, came to find herself in a Southampton church fellowship hall directing a group of actors with disabilities is a story in itself.

Born in Detroit, she came to New York to study acting at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, quickly married and moved to England, where her husband was producing a movie. She had two children, started a children's theater in London and another one once she moved back to the United States, then settled in Amagansett. ("I didn't want to live in New York City with two kids.")

She was performing in shows at places like the Stephen Talkhouse and Guild Hall when she was approached about East End Special Players, which was losing its director. The company describes itself as "celebrating differently abled actors," and includes people with learning disabilities, autism, Down syndrome and other cognitive or physical challenges. "I had no specific training working with actors with disabilities," said Leader, who now lives on Shelter Island. But the troupe's board thought her experience managing a group of performers with varying talents and abilities would be a good. "They were pretty insistent," Leader said, "encouraging me just to watch them."



Actor Lynn Fletcher gets her makeup done by East End Special Players assistant Elsa Prado for a rehearsal of “Turtles on the Tarmac,” an original play the debuts April 29 at Bay Street Theater. Credit: Morgan Campbell

## Telling their stories

Eventually she attended one of their rehearsals. “As soon as I walked in, my heart melted,” she recalled. The loving nature of the actors won her over, though she acknowledges being nervous about finding the right path for the group. “I didn’t want to do kid shows; I wanted them to be happy with the pieces they performed.”

Before Leader’s arrival, performances were mimed because not all the actors could speak. But some actors could, so she started teaching improv and acting exercises to tailor material to their abilities.

The first play she directed with Special Players was an adaptation of a short story, “From King Arthur With Love.” That was followed by “Cyrano de Bergerac” and “The Scams of Scapin” by Moliere

(heavy-duty pieces for any company). But as Leader got to know the players, she realized the best stories were their own.

The actors started creating pieces based on their life stories, with the players talking about issues they've faced, said Leader.

One young woman had had an abortion; another had been neglected; one young man had been teased because of his speech impediment, she explained.

Consider this speech by a woman playing a famous actress in "Turtles": "I've had a lot of hardships in my life. I came from a broken home where I felt unloved by my family. My father was abusive, and I had an ungrateful mother. I would cry; I was heartbroken. But now I've spread my wings and I'm flying."

"They're quite a bunch of characters," said Leader.



Collier Lee, left, high-fives Nakowa Weeks after the run-through of a scene at a rehearsal of "Turtles on the Tarmac." Credit: Morgan Campbell

## **Pandemic delay**

The group spends about a year creating and performing each of its shows, which in the past have included plays with whimsical titles like "You're a Petunia in My Garden," "Trouble in Jamaica" and

“Whimsey World.” The actors have generally been introduced to the group through word-of-mouth and then are invited to attend to see whether the troupe is a good fit.

“Turtles on the Tarmac” has been in the works for a couple of years, thanks to the pandemic, which forced the regular Saturday rehearsals onto Zoom. It’s a zany concoction involving an airport that has shut down because of bad weather, which somehow results in turtles getting loose on the runway.

With the planes grounded, what’s there to do but kill some time by putting on a talent show? That allows the actors to show their stuff, performing everything from an Elvis impersonation to a slapstick comedy duo, to a takeoff on “Gone With the Wind” (the actor doing the Rhett Butler part amusingly holds a sign proclaiming “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a darn”).



Collier Lee rehearses a comic scene from “Turtles on the Tarmac,” a play that was written by the troupe. Credit: Morgan Campbell

## Feeling like family

For the performers — there are upward of 20 in this show, ages 18 to 72 — it's the camaraderie that keeps them coming back. Four of the players gathered backstage during a break to talk about what the group means to them.

"I love making new friends," said Rebeccah Jansson, 35, of Patchogue. "It's awesome to see what everyone's good at."

"I love how we're all unique and have special talent; it's great to see everyone's happy face," said Jansson, who wrote the hip-hop number "My Driving Test," which she she performs in the show.

The best thing about this group is "all my friends," said Betsy Weinberger, 55, of Medford. "I love being here, and I love the way we make up our own scenes." Weinberger has been with the group for about 20 years.

Collier Lee, 26, of Sag Harbor, a newcomer this year, said he has already made good friends. Thinking for a moment, he clarified: "We're more than friends; we're like brothers and sisters. We're an acting family."

But make no mistake. Lee, like the others, prizes being on stage. Part of the comedy duo in the show, he recalled the feeling of joy during an early rehearsal when "everyone burst out laughing."



Tim Motyka, left, and Collier Lee rehearse a scene from "Turtles on the Tarmac" at First Presbyterian Church of Southampton. Credit: Morgan Campbell

For Tim Motyka, 27, it's all about performing. He portrays several characters in the show, at one point donning a blond wig and gold jacket to play the guitar during the talent show segment.

Special Players "gives me the chance to be part of the entertainment world," said the Riverhead resident. And he wants to take that as far as possible.

"I've got big dreams," said Motyka. "I want to be part of the industry." He also plays piano and drums, and for now has set his sights on trying to get roles in other local productions.

The dream is well within his reach. "I honestly think it's some of the best theater I've ever seen," said Chris Siefert of Noyac, deputy director of Bay Street Theater, where Special Players has been in residence since 2019. The residency gives the Special Players a place to perform and to meet people in the industry, said Siefert. Motyka and others will be seen by people who can make things happen.

But the residency "works in two directions," said Siefert. "There's tremendous impact on the staff at Bay Street as well."



Bill Wilson of Hampton Bays gets a mustache for his role in "Turtles on the Tarmac." Credit: Morgan Campbell

Siefert, who's on the Special Players' board, finds their work "extremely authentic, very genuine. There's a lot of passion and commitment, and that becomes a draw" to both audiences and staff.

"The players are coming to this from a different place," he said. "They're very interested in who their audience is, but they're also interested in being able to tell their own story. The players conceive the storyline entirely – that's not usually afforded to other troupes."

What does Siefert get out of it? As an individual who's worked in arts administration for the past 20 or 30 years, said Siefert, "I've been exposed to a lot of larger, more traditional organizations." This, he said, is "an opportunity to give back," especially giving the actors visibility they otherwise might not have. And, he added, it's an opportunity "to meet some new people. And enjoy good art."

Leader also runs a group called Explorers, which was started by the board to serve people with disabilities who are not interested in performing. The group meets every Thursday, gathering to prepare a meal, then working on an art or writing project. All this comes on top of working a 40-hour week as support staff at East End Disability Associates in Riverhead, a job she took at the recommendation of one of the Special Players' parents.

Leader says she gets more than she gives out of her work with the actors. She talks about losing her son to a drug overdose 10 years ago.

## **A sense of purpose**

"I had a hard time, obviously, and I wanted to not be around people, but I found peace with them," she said of the Special Players. As she became more confident, Leader said, she realized she was able "to give purpose to their lives. And they've given me purpose."

When she first started, said Leader, "I thought I'd be horrible at it . . . but, I don't know, it's kind of magic what happens."

There are times, said Leader, when an actor will get discouraged about their limitations. After all these years, Leader knows just how to respond, explaining that there are many things she wishes she could do: "We all have disabilities in some ways."



## “Turtles on the Tarmac”

**WHEN | WHERE** April 29, 4 p.m.; Bay Street Theater, 1 Bay St., Sag Harbor

**TICKETS** Preferred seating, \$75; standard seating, \$25; \$10 for students, children and people living in group homes; [eastendspecialplayers.org](http://eastendspecialplayers.org), 631-725-9500

**INFO** A reception and silent auction starts at 3 p.m.; following the show, Wölffer Estate winemaker Roman Roth will lead a live auction, all to benefit East End Special Players

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