

Inside Broadway kicks off its 50-school tour at P.S. 304 in Throggs Neck

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Inside Broadway kicks off its 2023 tour to NYC public schools with “Sophisticated Ladies.” From left, Shiloh Bennett, Noël Wippler, Jasón Wells and Kate Wesler.

Photo ET Rodriguez



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/mx9cDXgS0WU>

On the morning of Jan. 27, dozens of children packed the auditorium of P.S. 304 on Lafayette Avenue and screamed in joy and awe as four performers sang and danced to Donald McKayle's, "Sophisticated Ladies."

The 45-minute musical performance, directed and choreographed by Brittney Griffin, is composed entirely of Duke Ellington songs and threaded with dialogue that breaks the fourth wall — when actors speak directly to the audience — and explains the significance and the modern-day impact of the legendary pianist, composer and jazz band leader of the Harlem Renaissance. Ellington's popular hits include, "Take the A Train" and "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)," both of which are part of the "Sophisticated Ladies" musical lineup.

Some of the script has also been re-written to include the names of popular musical celebrities like Beyoncé, to stress how music from 100 years ago lives on today in contemporary music.

Friday's performance was the first of 50 that will take place through March as part of Inside Broadway – a nonprofit organization bringing Broadway-caliber performances to New York City public schools for the past 40 years. Over that time, the program has reached about 3 million students across the five boroughs.

Funding is provided by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA) as part of the Cultural After-School Adventures program grant – the largest subsidizer of culture across the U.S., according to the DCA website.

The show concluded with a Q&A with the elementary school students who asked questions like, how long it took to practice, to which the cast responded, two weeks. Among the schools on the Inside Broadway tour include 12 more in the Bronx, a borough that is historically overlooked and underserved when it comes to arts and culture.

“Sophisticated Ladies” was specifically chosen to coincide with Black History Month.

“Yesterday I learned about Ella Fitzgerald and the Harlem Renaissance. And I listened to 1920s Jazz music,” said Joshua Harris, a seven-year-old student who said his favorite part of the show were the songs.



“Sophisticated Ladies” company manager Nick Sala fields a question from a student at P.S. 304 on Friday, Jan. 27. Photo ET Rodriguez

And learning about such musical history and witnessing artistic expression is what Inside Broadway is all about.

“Jazz itself is one of the primary American forms of music – so for the kids to understand that it started with the African-American experience in America is a really amazing thing,” said Robbie Torres, musical director for “Sophisticated Ladies” and sole instrumentalist playing the keyboard, triangle, woodblock and shakers. Torres, who is self taught, has been playing music since he was a child and has been with Inside Broadway for two years despite never being able to afford formal music lessons.

The cast is a wonderful reflection of that same tenacity and spirit.

“I was dancing in my mother’s womb and she felt it,” said Kate Wesler, a veteran of theater who was gracing the stage with her splits and graceful limb extensions.

Others are greener, like Shiloh Bennett who was originally a saxophonist and began his career in musical theater just seven months ago. Jasón Wells was studying forensic science before he made the switch to the stage three years ago, and now he’s performing heel clicks and barrel turns. “I love putting smiles on people’s faces,” Wells said.

“You want to inspire somebody — when you see the children smiling and saying ‘wow’ and it’s like, ok, this is why we do it,” said Noël Wippler who has made the transition from musician to actor within the last three years when she joined the Actors Equity Association.

The cast and crew of “Sophisticated Ladies” stressed the importance of the arts in schools and feel that if they can touch the heart and mind of just one child, then they have accomplished their goal.

“No matter what you’re from or where you’re from or anything like that, you can keep moving and grooving,” Torres added.

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