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Child actors balance work, growing pains

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NEW YORK — Aaron Conley is an old hand at show biz. In February, he will celebrate his 300th performance in a Broadway musical. Hanging out backstage with the Hollywood director Spike Lee and entertaining guests at a book party for Andre Leon Talley, Vogue's editor at large, are all in a week's work for Conley.

But Conley is 11, so besides making sure he doesn't miss his cue as Young Simba in "The Lion King," he's got other things to worry about — like doing his homework and cleaning his room.

Conley is one of dozens of children who perform professionally in Manhattan. They are accomplished actors, singers and dancers who take great pride in what they do. But balancing the demands of an artistic career with growing pains isn't easy.

"They are performing a professional job and are expected to maintain academic standards. That's like having two jobs," said Willie Boston of the Actor's Equity Association, the union of theater actors and stage managers. "Plus, they're also kids, so my hat is off to them."

In Conley's case, that respect seems doubly earned. Not only does the sixth-grader from West Point, Miss., contribute to his family's income, as many child performers do, but he is, in fact, the sole breadwinner of the household.

Oretha O'Neal, a single mother who has raised Aaron and his sister, said that after leaving behind her network of family and friends in Mississippi, she found it impossible to keep a regular job while shuttling her son back and forth to auditions, rehearsals and shows.

Conley, whose wide smile reveals a gap between his teeth and who likes to wear his Yankees cap sideways, said he enjoyed being able to support his family. And O'Neal wants to make sure her son, whom she calls "Mr. Aaron," knows about checks and balances.

"He needs to learn how to spend the money, so I show him the pay stubs, tell him what he's taxed for, how much goes into his 401(k) plan," she said.

Apart from managing his income, Conley also has to stay focused on the job itself: doing cartwheels across the stage, belting out "I Just Can't Wait to Be King" astride a giant bird and mourning the death of his lion father — all in front of an audience of hundreds.

The children "carry the entire first act," said Niki White, the child wrangler for "The Lion King" who supervises young cast members behind the scenes. "If they were ever to slack off, it would affect everybody on stage. It's a huge responsibility."

Alan Simon, president of On Location Education, the country's premier teaching service for child actors, said this responsibility added a kind of pressure not usually experienced during childhood.

"What are the difficulties involved when you have multimillion-dollar budgets that ride on the backs of these performers and you ask children to step up to the plate?" he said. "That's not a child's role. They're being hired for the quality of being a child."

Some of the young performers attend private schools geared toward working minors who juggle careers and academic expectations. But programs like the Professional Children's School in Manhattan are expensive, so when Conley first moved to New York last year, he enrolled in a Harlem public school instead.

Soon, the boy's teachers started to complain whenever he had to leave early for a Wednesday matinee.

"Then I had to pull him out for other auditions and rehearsals, and the staff would ask, 'You're taking him out again?' " O'Neal recalled. "It created a lot of conflict."

Conley also had to deal with the fact that his classmates behaved differently once they knew what he did when he wasn't in school, an experience the other children in the show shared.

"The friends that I told don't even hang out with me anymore," said Jarrell Singleton, 11, of New York City, who takes turns performing the role of Young Simba with Conley.

Alex de Castro, 10, of Yonkers, who plays Young Nala opposite Singleton, recalled similar behavior from fellow students. "They go, 'Oh boy, here comes the Broadway princess,' " she said. "I just want them to treat me normally."

In the end, O'Neal decided to home-school Conley. In addition to a "Lion King" canvas bag stuffed with headshots and resumes, the boy now totes around a bright yellow backpack filled with history and geography books to take to the library between auditions and shows.

Performing and keeping up with schoolwork leave little time for play.

"I don't get to relax because there is still homework to do," de Castro said of her days off. "It's just like another work day."

Meeting with other children is difficult, said Natalie Guerrero, 11, of Larchmont, N.Y., who is Nala to Conley's Simba. "I want to go to sleepovers," she said. "But nobody has parties on Mondays and Tuesdays."

Helping child actors maintain connections with old friends is important, said Janet Palazzato, parent liaison for the Screen Actors Guild Young Performers Committee.

"On off-days, make a play date. Let them stay in touch by e-mail. Get them a cell phone," suggested Palazzato, whose own daughter started modeling and shooting television commercials at age 6.

Despite all the challenges these young performers face, none of them are eager to give up their jobs.

"People ask me, 'How do you do this every day? You leave school, then go to do a performance,'" Guerrero said. "But we have such a great time. It makes you feel good to watch the audience and see people's faces light up."

For Conley, acting is a release. "When I'm angry, I can just roar," he said. "If I wasn't acting and singing, I wouldn't know what to do."

Ultimately, it is up to the adults in these children's lives to make sure there is a balance between career, school and social activities.

"It's fun to win an audition or a competition, but then comes the work," said Paul Petersen, who starred in "The Donna Reed Show" as a boy and has been an advocate for child actors for more than 30 years. "Everything that is important for a child's development gets put on hold if the work takes precedence. And work is a different kettle of fish when you're a kid."

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