

Tiny, but full of heart

Story of Thumbelina brings courage and hope to sick kids

By **Tiziana Rinaldi**

Pediatric patients at Jacobi Medical Center will be helping Thumbelina find her way home to family and friends, this June 16, when Elephant Ensemble Theater brings their adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's children classic to the hospital's playroom.

Thumbelina is a miniature girl on a mission. She may be thumb-sized, but don't let appearances mislead you; she has gargantuan courage. And, if tiny Thumbelina can nurture such determination, surmounting huge obstacles to achieve her dreams, so can her little Bronx friends at Jacobi's.

"Thumbelina: The Story of a Brave Little Girl" first debuted in New York City in October 2007, at Mt. Sinai Hospital's KidsZone TV where the production was televised, live, into children's rooms. The June 16 performance will be the second in the Bronx, after a first engagement at Children's Hospital at Montefiore, in March.

Playwright Liza Lentini formed Elephant Ensemble Theater with long time friend Christine Seisler in 2006 to provide face-to-face theatrical productions for kids in hospitals. Special attention is given to those medical centers, both in the metropolitan area and the suburbs, whose resources do not include this programming.

"[We are] committed to presenting recreations of some of the best children's stories of our time. Thumbelina is undoubtedly part of that canon," said Lentini, who had been thinking of a non-commercial, service-oriented, travelling theater for years.

"In [our version] Thumbelina is a real kid, a feisty one," said Lentini, who's also the play director, "I was conscious to incorporate themes of overcoming fears, trusting new friends and recognizing the importance of love within families. There's also quite a bit of humor, which kids seem to appreciate."

Establishing a nonprofit, itinerant company was a labor of love. Elephant Ensemble Theater does not accept payment for performances, and runs operations on private contributions mostly provided by its members. Lentini, a full-time writer who just completed a book on children's author Robert Tallon, cashed in her pension to gather the initial funds for the start up.

The remaining four members, including Seisler who serves as the ensemble's managing director and plays "Mama" in Thumbelina's thirty-minute long theatrical adaptation, are professional actors who volunteer their work. Mollie Lohinski plays the title character, Cheri Haller is the "Sparrow" and Christopher Van Jura is "Funny Bug."

"This was a chance to combine my



The cast of Elephant Ensemble Theater brings their adaption of 'Thumbelina' to the Jacobi Medical Center on June 16.

passion for acting," said Seisler, "with my love for children and a personal need to give back."

Both Lentini's and Seisler's expertise of children theater is drawn from well-honed entertainment experiences. Lentini acquired knowledge in the field with a master of fine arts from the Southern Illinois University, while Seisler's professional focus was shaped at the Florida Children's Repertory Theater, in Orlando, and Shakespeare for Kids, in New York.

Skillfully using time tested techniques the two artists inserted ad-hoc interactive segments in the play to engage youngsters and heighten their morale, weaving a narrative of hope, empowerment and possibility. In some scenes the kids are called upon to distract a scary spider, so Thumbelina can escape a dark forest. In another, they blow on the clouds of an incoming storm to help their petite hero fly home on the Sparrow's back.

"Children love Thumbelina," said Mollie Lohinski, who accepted the role hoping to bring joy to kids affected by illnesses, "they [like] all the characters. Even in the pre-show, we talk to the children and get them to laugh. They love it." During the March performance at

Montefiore a very excited little girl, approximately five-year old, could hardly stay in her seat. At the end of the performance she ran up to Lohinski (Thumbelina) and hugged her so very tight. "I don't think there was a dry eye among us," recalled Lentini.

"The best kids stories have a grown-up element in them," said Lentini about her play, "our [story] definitely has that. Adults are truly delighted by it, as are the children. They love watching Thumbelina overcome obstacles, and cheer on when she gets the best of the bad guys."

The intention to channel positivity started with Lentini's choice of the company's name.

"You just say the word 'elephant' and people have an immediate positive [reaction]," explained Lentini. Especially in Asian and African cultures, the large mammal is associated with wisdom, power, good luck and dignity. A symbolism, Lentini believes, rooted in elephants' massive strength and, yet, gentle nurture of their young.

Since its launch last fall, the group has performed in Manhattan, the Bronx and Long Island. With recognition knocking at the door an expansion of repertoire,

currently including a clowning workshop, a musician in residence and educational theater, is also in the works.

Two upcoming productions are "The Pirate and the Squid," an underwater adventure between a seafaring pirate, a friendly squid and its numerous oceanic friends, and "Sacagawea" an uplifting play about the Shoshone girl who led Lewis and Clark on the expedition to the Pacific.

Many are the supporters of this uniquely driven theater group. Ross Ellis, founder and chief executive officer of Love Our Children USA, a national organization for the prevention of children's neglect and violence, feels that Elephant Ensemble Theater's work is selfless and profoundly giving.

"Elephant Ensemble Theater donate their talent to children in New York City hospitals," said Ross, "who would otherwise be focusing on their illness and their hospital experience; neither of which is pleasant."

For more about Elephant Ensemble Theater's work and upcoming performance at Jacobi Medical Center visit www.elephanttheater.com, email info@elephanttheater.com, or call 212-252-4742.