

From the Desk of E. Dale Smith-Gallo

11 James Street ♦ Montclair, NJ 07042 ♦ (917) 399-0843 ♦ edalesmith13@gmail.com



November 23, 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing on behalf of Ben Liebert, an insightful and inventive director with whom I have had the privilege of working both as a creative producer and as an actor. As a theatre educator by profession, I have been given the opportunity to serve on the board of Studio Playhouse in Montclair, NJ, as the Creative Producer—guiding our talent to the next level as they work to stage their shows—and I can say that my experiences with Mr. Liebert both on the stage and behind the scenes have been thoroughly enjoyable.

Ben approached our Season Planning Committee with several ideas, but the panel quickly gravitated to his visionary (yet highly specific) concept for Sondheim & Lapines' *Into the Woods*. As a perennial favorite of the non-professional theatre scene, a traditional staging is a hard sell in our community. Who wants to see yet another production of the show that they have seen five times in the last four years? (It's amazing what we community theatre people will do for our friends.) But this one sounded different. Ben came with visions of a children's library—a deeply personal space where the magic of storybooks mixed with a little real-life stage magic to showcase the beauty of the show in a new way.

The board was sold, but I (admittedly) remained skeptical. The word "concept" is not always seen in a positive light at the community theatre level. All too often we see "concepts" that are either abandoned 10 minutes into the show (leaving you with a nonsensical set and costume plot encompassing a traditional staging) or is so heavy-handed that the original messages of the show are completely lost. However, my concerns were quickly abated as the show began to take shape in rehearsal. His revival was the real deal, so to speak. The story remained central to the production, but the conceptual touches—using newspapers on library dowels as birds, an unexpected growing beanstalk housed within a "save our library" bulletin board—continued to surprise and delight throughout the production. The set evolved, not in appearance but in meaning and interpretation. And as the word spread among our usual audience members, the audiences began to grow... and grow. People wanted to see this new staging, and the ovations at the end of each performance (a rarity in community theatre) stood as undeniable evidence of just how successful his approach had been.

Perhaps what is most impressive about this feat is the level of professionalism that he brought to our amateur theatre. He cast a group of 10 actors—most playing multiple roles—that he was able to sculpt into a cohesive unit of trust and respect. Any notes of concern were given privately and confidentially, and the cast remained unaware of just how much work that he was doing to maintain a positive experience behind the scenes. His greatest asset lies in his genuinely affable personality. Ben is someone that you *want* to work for. He is open to suggestions. He is a problem solver. He is a cheerleader. He makes his actors feel valued. And they, in turn, work all the harder to please him and give great performances.

Ben Liebert is an exceptional director that I have no question will achieve great things in the field. I can confidently say that he will leave your theatre as excited by the results as he has left ours. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me through any of the means listed above if you would like more information about Mr. Liebert or his work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "E. Dale Smith-Gallo", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive.

E. Dale Smith-Gallo
Creative Producer
Studio Playhouse, Montclair, NJ