

[Hilan Warshaw's class featured on p. 2.]

Usdan's 40th a showstopper Famous alums will be on hand to applaud the arts camp tomorrow

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Say "summer day camp" to just about anyone and you'll evoke memories of thick-forested woodlands or long morning bus rides with chattering pals. For Jane Monheit, something else comes to mind: rejection.

Boundless, if character-building, rejection.

The twice-Grammy nominated jazz singer auditioned for musicals in 1990 and '91 while attending the Usdan Center for the Creative and Performing Arts in Wheatley Heights. "Twelfth Night." "Pippin." "The Roar of the Greasepaint." She didn't win roles in any of them.

"At Usdan, I learned how to be a small fish," the Oakdale native, now 29, said recently from a tour stop in California. "It's where I learned that a lot of work and study goes into any performance, and that success wasn't going to be easy."

Monheit, whose vocalizing has earned her comparisons to Ella Fitzgerald, was a Usdanite for three summers in all and calls it a place where faculty and her fellow campers were "mind-blowingly talented" - thus, the fierce competition for roles. She returns every so often to perform, and will do so again at the center's 40th anniversary gala tomorrow night, where she'll also help bestow kudos on other prominent alums.

Long Island's Tanglewood

Something of a Tanglewood for the 6- to 18-year-old set, Usdan was formed in 1968 as a place to introduce children to the arts. It was modeled after the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies sleepaway camp at Interlochen, Mich., though it is a secular group with a diverse student body. Real estate millionaire Samuel Lemberg gave the initial \$1-million donation to build the camp, asking that it be named for his daughter, the late Suzanne Usdan, and her husband, Nathaniel.

Although many of Usdan's alumni have forged careers in the arts, Usdan officials stress that their mission is not to prepare campers for such a path. Rather, says executive director Dale Lewis, "the purpose is for kids who love the arts to study with wonderful professionals and to have the arts as a companion for life." The 150-member faculty includes the artistic director of the Ballet San Jose, a Rockette and the former head of the Joffrey Ballet School.

The camp offers "majors" in seven disciplines: music, art, theater, dance, writing, nature and chess. Within each group there are specific programs, such as classical guitar, cartooning, digital photography and ballet, for various skill levels. Students study their major for two hours every day and the minor for one.

Usdan's classes are open to students (or "campers") age 6 to 18. Roughly 1,600 attend, most from Long Island; the boroughs, Westchester, Connecticut and New Jersey also are represented. Some 130 buses ship students to and from the 9:30 a.m.-3 p.m. sessions five days a week. (Fees range from \$2,350 to \$3,250 for half or full-summer programs, with scholarships available.)

Anyone for chess?

If it's not already obvious, Usdan is the kind of place where kids tend to cut tennis class to practice their Tchaikovsky. (Yes, there are two Olympic-sized swimming pools and tennis courts that are part of the daily offerings, and they're well-used.) A woodsy walk away from the administration office is what may be the country's only dedicated building for the study and enjoyment of chess. Here, professional chess master and Oceanside resident Joel Salman teaches boys (and, lately, a contingent of girls amounting to 15 percent of some classes) the rules of the game. On a bulletin board in one corner, someone has left an "inspirational" quote from comic Emo Philips: "My computer beat me in chess, but it was no match when it came to kickboxing."

And talk about embracing your inner intellectual: In the relatively new Video as a Film Art program, instructor Hilan Warshaw, a PBS documentary film editor, began the summer by screening Akira Kurosawa's "Rashomon" for his students, then having them produce their own student films sampling from the director's cut-away techniques.

"I'm trying to emphasize how great films are constructed and how they create meaning in nonverbal ways," Warshaw said during a chat in a hallway of the camp's Block Television and Video Arts Center.

For all students regardless of major, a noteworthy component of each day is a lunchtime concert at the 1,000-seat McKinley Amphitheater, named for Andrew and Lily McKinley; he was an opera star and violin teacher who conceived the camp. Each July, the theater plays host to acclaimed artists such as flutist James Galway and the Tokyo String Quartet. In August, students share their work with each other in performances with Usdan bands, choruses,

orchestras, dance companies and chamber music ensembles.

A one-time Usdan student himself, orchestra director Laurence Isaacson says the \$4-million amphitheater, which opened in 2001, marks the biggest difference in camp offerings between 1968 and now. "But interestingly, there's not a lot that's different from when Usdan first opened," says Isaacson, who has been a trombonist with the Boston, San Francisco, Chicago and Detroit symphony orchestras. "The model they started with still works."

Alumni abounding

The 50,000 "graduates" of Usdan are represented in every major orchestra and dance company in the country. Well-known former campers include Natalie Portman and Mariah Carey, who, as a first-year student in 1980, played Hodel, Tevey's daughter, in "Fiddler on the Roof." Echoes of Monheit's experience? Carey, in a visit back a few years ago, kvetched that she only made understudy in the class production the next year: "I felt kind of foiled," the pop star told Newsday in 1998. "But not having a lead role gave me a chance to have a lot of fun that summer."

Other noted alums include Seth Rudetsky ("Seth's Broadway Chatterbox"), Lisa Gay Hamilton (TV's "The Practice") and Jackie Hoffman (currently in "Xanadu" on Broadway).

Alumni honorees at tomorrow's gala will include playwright Michele Lowe ("The Smell of the Kill"), actor Jordan Leeds ("I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change"), violinist Adela Pea, Lesley Friedman Rosenthal, general counsel for Lincoln Center, and Alexis Rosen, president of the pioneering Internet service provider Panix.

Usdan has expanded in recent years with the Heckscher-Usdan Student Art Institute, which offers year-round training to advanced high-school age visual artists. There is an annual weekend program for adults, "Usdan University" - this year, the archery classes filled up first. "Summer in September" is an intensive weekend study for high school students in essay writing. Lewis says that a "distant dream" involves the idea of a year-round high school for the performing arts.

In her call from California, Monheit emphasized that Usdan was always a place where kids with an artistic bent could develop their skills "in an atmosphere of acceptance." Current campers say that couldn't remain more true today.

"It's amazing here," says Megan Reilly, 15, of Merrick. The Calhoun High School 11th-grader is in her seventh summer at Usdan. This season, she won the title role in "Sugar," the musical based on the movie "Some Like It Hot."

"I love musical theater, and this is a place where you get so much experience," Reilly says. "You get to do what you love for seven weeks nonstop."