

Performance academy helps to bridge cultural divide

► THEATER

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eny, in Newbury's Byfield section, honing their performance skills as they prepare for roles in North Shore Music Theatre's summer spotlight productions of "Thoroughly Modern Millie" and "The Rocky Horror Show."

The story behind the foreign theater students' residency has more than a touch of the dramatic.

Jan Weiler and Jonas Degen, both 16, and 17-year-olds Inez Schaefer and Markus Wilson are here on scholarships from the Patton-Plusczyk Foundation, a cultural organization founded in Germany by Helen Patton. She is the granddaughter of an American hero of World War II, the late General George S. Patton Jr.

Her mother, Joanne, owns Green Meadows Farm in South Hamilton; her father, George S. Patton IV, who was also a general, died in 2004.

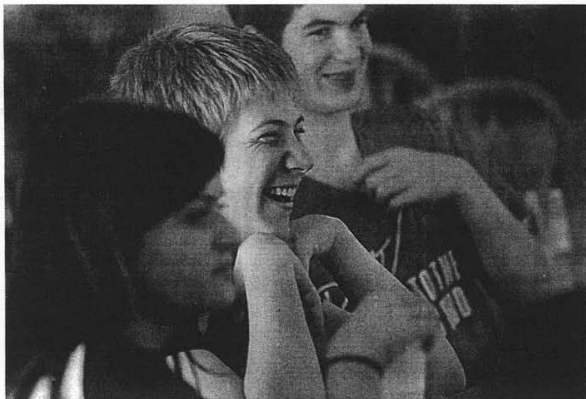
Helen Patton is married to Dr. Thorsten Plusczyk, a German surgeon. She did not learn until after the birth of their first son that her husband's grandfather, a German officer during World War II, was spared from a Russian firing squad by none other than her grandfather.

Bridging cultural divides through the arts is the aim of the Patton-Plusczyk Foundation, said Patton, speaking on the phone from a family vacation in England. "If you put two opposing entities — two cultures, or two heritages, or a man and a woman — together and provide a context for tension, and then help them see it through, you get your byproduct — an exponent of two."

North Shore Music Theatre's summer Youth Performance Academy has been greatly enriched by the participation of the German students, said assistant director of education Tony Schine, who is directing "The Rocky Horror Show."

In a fast-growing program — this year the academy chose 71 students from 140 candidates, up from 60 acceptances and 85 candidates last year — the Beverly-based theater is making plans to recruit both nationally and internationally.

Next year, Schine, who was born in Germany and raised in Vermont, will travel overseas to at-



German teenagers (from left) Inez Schaefer, Jan Weiler, and Jonas Degen relax during lunch at the North Shore Music Theatre's Youth Performance Academy, which they are attending through the Patton-Plusczyk Foundation. Joanne Patton (right), mother of its founder, watches a rehearsal at the Governor's Academy.



PHOTOS BY PATRICIA MCDONNELL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

tend auditions for a new crop of student performers; the theater also is developing a relationship with England's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art.

On a picture-perfect day last week, the German students walked across the pristine campus from the theater to the dining hall, where they took a break for lunch after their morning dance, music, and acting workshops.

"We always encourage them to have a little protein for the afternoon," said education director Burgess Clark.

Over salads and sandwiches, the students joked in well-tutored English. Lanky Markus, wearing a manicured beard and a T-shirt that read "All-American," rolled his eyes as Jan began to recount his story of a

struggle with his host family's plumbing system.

"The headline will be, 'Germans Cannot Use Toilets!'" Markus groaned.

They were soon joined at their table by Joanne Patton, who is hosting Jonas in her South Hamilton home. Patton, a longtime North Shore Music Theatre board member and lifelong fan of the theater, was amused to learn that the students already were familiar with "The Rocky Horror Show" through its cult-favorite film version. She has never seen it: "I want to be surprised," she said.

Then she asked about the ex-

tent of the students' immersion in more mainstream musical theater in Germany. Her reference to "The Threepenny Opera" composer Kurt Weill — "I always looked to him as the master," she said — was met with blank stares.

"No idea," admitted Markus. Joanne Patton's five children were raised with a deep education in the theater. As an aspiring actress, a young Helen Patton took a job as a singing waitress at the old North Shore theater restaurant. The academy scholarship is named for Dorothea Schoenwasser, a German actress who became the family's nanny during a military stint overseas. She died in Hamilton several years ago.

"She kept every single memento from North Shore Music Theatre, every cocktail napkin," said Helen Patton.

Her father, she said, was an avid theatergoer. "He knew every song from every Broadway hit," she said. "He was incredibly admiring and in awe of performers — Fred Astaire, for example. He'd say, 'He makes it look so easy!'"

"That's what makes acting so wonderful, what makes the arts so freeing for the viewer."

Helen Patton would love to be in the audience for this weekend's performances, but she has other obligations. Her foundation is sponsoring a concert — a "friendship gesture" — in the Normandy village where her grandfather had his camp during the war.

"I trust the kids are having their experience," she said. "It'd be a great pleasure for me to see the shows, but I know the kids will

come back changed. And the theater will be changed because of those kids."

"Thoroughly Modern Millie" is on

stage at 8 tonight, 7 p.m. Saturday, and 2 p.m. Sunday. "The Rocky Horror Show" will be performed at 8 p.m. tomorrow, 2 p.m. Saturday, and 7 p.m.

Sunday. All performances are at the Governor's Academy, 1 Elm St., Byfield. Tickets are \$10-\$20. For more information, call 978-232-7200 or visit nsmt.org.

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