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Staten Island Advance

TEN ISLAND, N. Y., SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 1953

Bread and Butter

Psychiatrists Wonder at Outcome As Musician Readies Big Show



Willowbrook State School's music director, Vincent Lombardi, rehearses with a group of his instrumentalists in preparation for a new experiment in the field of music therapy.

Lombardi Plans To Stage Hit At Willowbrook

By ERWIN ENDRESS

An epidemic of raised eyebrows among top New York State psychiatrists resulted recently when a young music director at Willowbrook State School swallowed hard, then made an announcement.

The director, 29-year-old Vincent Lombardi, told them he intended to produce an original four-act, Broadway-type musical production at the school for the mentally retarded!

True, the project could boomerang into failure.

But Lombardi pointed out that Dr. Harold H. Berman, the noted psychiatrist who directs Willowbrook, had originated the idea and was firmly convinced it could suc-

director of music at the school for two years.

He had no prior experience with the mentally retarded, but he has proven that the capabilities of such children can be developed, with surprising results in the field of music.

IT WASN'T LONG after he came to Willowbrook that he developed a 34-piece band. Only recently, when it played before an audience of 2,000 persons at a function of the Benevolent Society for the Retarded at Manhattan's Hotel Astor, its repertoire amazed listeners.

The children, some of which Lombardi says are "extremely talented," played everything from Tschalkowsky's "March Slav" to "Over the Rainbow." Right now, Lombardi says, the band plays such popular numbers as "You Belong to Me" and "Hold Me."

"You just can't beat the enthusiasm of these children," Lombardi

normal teen-agers might not be able to succeed so quickly in preparing a musical show because they are "distracted in too many ways."

"Willowbrook's children, living a somewhat confined existence," he says, "find that this show is a grand diversion. The result is their complete and undivided attention."

As a musician, Lombardi specializes in trumpet. But he also plays trombone, saxophone, clarinet and other instruments, including the drums. Three years with the 676th U.S. Army Air Force Band at Macon, Ga., during World War II, rounded out his musical education, he says.

Lombardi and his wife, Kathleen, make their home at 28 Cliffside avenue, Stapleton. It was there that Lombardi, with the encouragement of his wife, spent weeks framing a plot for his musical, and there he composed the music and lyrics. He now is shaping up orchestration

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LOMBARDI outlined the plan.

He would make use of the capabilities and enthusiasm of mentally retarded children to stage the show. From among them, he would select vocalists and children with dramatic talent for speaking roles. There would be a 34-piece band to provide music.

The show would be replete with original ballads, an original plot and completely original music throughout.

Dr. Berman points out that the plan is in keeping with the whole purpose of the school for the mentally retarded: To take full advantage of the individual's capabilities.

"Music is an adjunct to psychotherapy," he says, "as are many other forms of group activity. All are utilized to give the child a feeling that he belongs, a feeling that he has a place in society and a feeling of security. Every child has some assets. On these, we must capitalize."

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WOULD SUCH a show—because of the type of student available for casting—take long to produce?

On the contrary, Lombardi argued, it might take less time and work than it might to produce such a show among mentally-proficient teen-agers.

Some psychiatrists shook their heads.

They pointed out that it would be the first time so elaborate a music therapy project had been undertaken in a school for the mentally retarded.

Dr. Berman, an authority in the field of psychiatric research, backed Lombardi to the hilt. He said he had gotten the idea of staging such a show after seeing a group of professionals do a "not-so-good" job on a familiar musical comedy.

"I became convinced," said he, "that our children could do a better job, given the opportunity and the time."

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THE RESULT was Lombardi's musical, "Imagination Lane." It is now in production at Willowbrook and will be staged shortly for the Staten Island public and for relatives and friends of the children.

Interested onlookers will be psychiatrists and officials of the Department of Mental Hygiene.

Lombardi, who studies for a master's degree in education at Wagner College in his spare time, has been

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"You just can't beat the enthusiasm of these children," Lombardi says. "They throw themselves wholeheartedly into these projects . . . Enthusiasm and concentration on the task at hand are the qualities upon which both individual and group success can be based, I have found."

* * *

THE YOUNG music director says

division, the result is their complete and undivided attention." As a musician, Lombardi specializes in trumpet. But he also plays trombone, saxophone, clarinet and other instruments, including the drums. Three years with the 676th U.S. Army Air Force Band at Macon, Ga., during World War II, rounded out his musical education, he says.

Lombardi and his wife, Kathleen, make their home at 28 Cliffside avenue, Stapleton. It was there that Lombardi, with the encouragement of his wife, spent weeks framing a plot for his musical, and there he composed the music and lyrics. He now is shaping up orchestrations for his show.

"Anyone could succeed with these children," says Lombardi. "They want to do this show, so how could anyone miss?"

About 60 kids who will take part in Lombardi's show think he's too modest.

But they're sure he's right.

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