

The real 'Fame'

By REED TUCKER

Last Updated: 4:11 PM, September 20, 2009

Posted: 10:38 PM, September 19, 2009

Irene Cara wasn't exaggerating. "Fame" — it really is going to live for-ever. Even after one movie, a TV series and an off-Broadway play, audiences are still fascinated by the goings-on at New York's High School for the Performing Arts.

A remake of the classic 1980 film hits theaters Friday, and while the cast is a little bit more well-scrubbed, the school's interior less dark and prison-like, one thing remains consistent with the original: scrappy youngsters clawing for that big break.

What's now known as the "Fame" school was founded in 1936 as the High School of Music & Art. A sister act, the School of Performing Arts, opened on West 46th Street in 1948. The two institutions merged in 1984 to form the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, now opposite Lincoln Center.

LaGuardia is technically the "Fame" school, but the city offers lots of arts-oriented schools for aspiring Cocos and Leroys. A Department of Education spokesperson says 21 have opened since 2002 alone. Maybe some of them out there are looking to trade on the film's name.

"I was told by all the teachers and principals at my school that it was the original 'Fame' school," says Asher Book, who stars in the new "Fame" and attended Professional Performing Arts School (PPAS) on West 48th. "I guess it's still up in the air."

Students at LaGuardia who wear sweatshirts with "The 'Fame' school" emblazoned on the back would disagree. (We imagine they'll settle this disagreement the "West Side Story" way — with finger snapping.)

PPAS's principal Keith Ryan is more diplomatic. "Asher was here before I was here," he says. "Who knows what he was told." Exteriors for the new film were shot at PPAS, as opposed to LaGuardia, perhaps because of its more classical look.

Nitpicking aside, there's something inherently interesting about these schools. But what is life really like inside them? Is it anything close to "Fame?" Perhaps some classic quotes from the original film can guide us.

"This is no Mickey Mouse school. You're not getting off easy because you're talented."

Competition is insanely fierce to gain admission, especially to LaGuardia. Out of 9,000 applicants last year, 664 were accepted. Prospective students have to audition (would-be drama majors must perform two monologues) and have good grades.

"I was so intimidated when I first got there," says Paul Iacono, who plays Neil in "Fame" and graduated from PPAS. "I remember sweating and having panic tacks nearly, because for some reason the audition to get into that school was 10 times more important than an actual audition for a Broadway play or film."

"It's better than a real school. It's free and you don't get raped in the hallways."

"That school was more than just a place to learn about the arts," Iacono says. "It was an asylum of kids from every borough. It was a way out of the mundane lifestyle. I was tortured in middle school. Absolutely tortured. I was a chubby, awkward theater kid. The school was like the island of misfit toys. We didn't fit in any other place. That's the truth. It teaches people that it's OK to be different and to not to have to look and dress and act and talk like everyone else."

"I've tried every diet in the world since I was little."

Staying skinny is a constant worry, especially among dancers. "The dancers were all eating grapefruits," says Steve Lewis, a School of Performing Arts grad and former president of the alumni association. "The dancers were very heavily into keeping their weight down. If they gained weight, they wouldn't be able to do what they wanted." On the plus side, Lewis says every guy in school crushed on the dancers.

"He's not going up until he checks his knife. We don't cut each other up here."

Don't they? "It was definitely competitive," Lewis says. "In the music department, you wanted to be first chair. You would hope the other guy would get a blister on his lip so he couldn't play. With the dancers, you know the old saying 'break a leg?' They really meant it."

Competition for the school's musicals and plays is especially fierce.

"I remember crying and thinking it was the end of the world when I didn't get the lead in the play," Iacono says. "It wasn't just me. There was a girl who literally lost five pounds in the week before the audition because she was determined to play the sexy role."

Students wouldn't stoop to sabotage, but head games were common.

"People were just mean and catty," Iacono says. "If you thought you were better than me, through passive-aggressive body

language, you'd let me know when we were standing in line together.”

“If you don't give your academic subjects equal attention, you're out.”

Students at LaGuardia study the same academic subjects that other city students do, but they also have a few hours of training in their field tacked on, like four dance classes a day.

“A lot of things you'd notice people doing were cutting the academics,” Lewis says. “You would have your music in the morning and the academics in the afternoon, and we'd cut those. We'd go down to Radio City and watch the taping of some TV shows. One of our friends got busted when he had won some money on a game show, and his mother saw him on TV.”

“People think it's this weird high school — they don't even think we have academic classes,” says Taylor Amari, a junior dance major at LaGuardia. “It's exactly the same as a regular school. We're just here longer.”

Yes, they have open-mike lunches during Spirit Week, and famous people have been known to drop by for Q&As (Joan Jett and Jeff Goldblum showed up at PPAS), but these schools aren't all that different from regular ones. The major difference is that none of the other schools had a movie made about them.

“I get hundreds of e-mails a month from people who want to come to the school,” Lewis says. “They'll say, ‘My daughter's a dancer. I saw the movie ‘Fame.’ I tell them to go see LaGuardia.”

“Everyone here is aware of the movie,” says Molly Allen, a junior drama major at LaGuardia. “A lot of people talk about it. One of the teachers, Mr. Moody, just retired last year, and he was in the original movie.”

“The original movie was a reference,” Iacono says. “Any time you went to a party in the city and people asked you where you went to school, ‘Oh, the ‘Fame’ high school?’ Yeah, the ‘Fame’ high school.”

Current students, get ready for another 15 minutes.

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Fame's Honor Roll

By REED TUCKER

Last Updated: 1:17 AM, September 20, 2009

Posted: 1:14 AM, September 20, 2009

So many famous people graduated from LaGuardia Arts that the school gives a slideshow to students each year showcasing all the celeb alumni. And who does that slideshow begin with? Jennifer Aniston, class of 1987. Besides the "Friends" star, other big-name grads of LaGuardia (or its predecessors) include Al Pacino, Ellen Barkin, Liza Minnelli, Dom DeLuise and Sarah Michelle Gellar. What was it like? Here's what they have to say:

Jennifer Aniston: The daughter of two actors got accepted after performing a monologue from Neil Simon's "I Ought to Be in Pictures." At school, she became good friends with Chastity Bono, and turned into a rebel. "I wore black and had a mohawk," she told *In Style*. "I wasn't beautiful, so I had to be funny." Classmates say that's not quite true, and that Jen was popular with the boys.

Adrian Grenier: The "Entourage" star graduated in 1994, and says LaGuardia was "like high school with tights." Grenier, who plays drums in the Honey Brothers, learned to play guitar in the halls of the school.

Jonathan Lethem: The Brooklyn-based author, whose "Chronic City" comes out next month, graduated in 1982 from Music & Art, and was in school when the original "Fame" hit theaters. "I think the filmmakers wanted to get the kids from the actual school on their side. They reserved an afternoon at a local theater, and we were all bussed in to watch it," he says. "We thought it was totally laughable. I remember thinking, 'Oh, God. This movie is going to disappear.' We could not believe it was a hit. The idea of it as a projection of our experience seemed really silly.

"There were a lot of kids at school there who would become important, early rap musicians," he says. "A lot of guys were doing things that weren't necessarily being recognized as important by the teachers, but was gonna become culturally important. The guys who became 3rd Bass were there. I believe we had Slick Rick, too."

Adrien Brody: The Oscar-winner attended the school from 1987 to 1991, and told *Page Six Magazine*, "LaGuardia was useful in teaching me techniques. But high school is nothing like the real world. It's a genre of its own."