

# Newsies Jr.

Presented by the Thalian Association

Fridays & Saturdays at 7:30 pm

Sundays at 3:00 pm

2<sup>nd</sup> Street Stage

Hannah Block Historic USO/Community Arts Center

120 South 2<sup>nd</sup> Street

Disney's theatre production of *Newsies Jr.* is a junior adaptation of the Broadway musical *Newsies*. The story is based on the 1992 Disney film written by Bob Tzudiker and Noni White. *Newsies Jr.* is inspired by the rousing true story of newsboys and newsgirls in turn-of-the-century New York City. *Newsies Jr.* features a Tony Award-winning score by Alan Menken and Jack Feldman and a book by Tony Award winner Harvey Fierstein. When powerful newspaper publishers raise prices at the newsboys' expense, the charismatic Jack Kelly rallies newsies from across the city to strike against the unfair conditions. Together, the newsies learn that they are stronger united and create a movement to fight for what's right. Including the now-classic songs "Carrying the Banner," "Seize the Day," and "Santa Fe," *Newsies Jr.* is a timeless story full of spirit and heart.



## About the Thalian Association

Thalian Association Community Theatre is a non-profit, membership organization that's dedicated to enhancing the rich artistic environment of the Cape Fear

region. Tracing its roots back to 1788, the Thalian Association Community Theatre was founded to provide arts education and bring the excitement of the performing arts to Wilmington, North Carolina. Today the Thalian Association Community Theatre produces five major productions annually on the Main Stage at historic Thalian Hall, offers a Youth Theatre program and professionally manages the Hannah Block Historic USO/Community Arts Center for the City of Wilmington. In 2007, the North Carolina legislature named the Thalian Association Community Theatre the Official Community Theater of North Carolina.



## Learn about the Newsies' Strike of 1899



Newsies in New York City getting afternoon papers in 1910. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Photo sourced from U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

### Life in the 1890s

In the 1890s, newspapers were the most important way to get news. Radio was invented around that time, but it wouldn't become a form of mainstream media until nearly 40 years later. Television wasn't even created until the 1920s, and most American households didn't have a television until the end of the 1950s.



Newsies in Newark, NJ in Dec. 1909. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Photo sourced from Library of Congress.



New York City in 1892 during a Columbus Day Parade. Photo sourced from the New York Public Library.

The musical theatre show *Newsies Jr.* is based on the Newsies' Strike of 1899 that took place in and around New York City. Read the following paragraphs to learn more about how the story of the newsies on strike went on to become the subject of a musical theatre production and continue to inspire generations of young people around the world.

So, in the 1890s, newspapers were a crucial form of media as people relied on them daily as the source of current news. Large publications in cities like New York published two papers per day with a morning edition and an evening edition. While the morning edition was often delivered directly to customers, the distribution of the evening editions relied heavily on newspaper sellers, often called newsies, to get the papers to the customers.

## The Newsies of the Late 1800s



Newsies sleep on the streets of Mexico City in the 1920s. Photograph by Jacob A. Riis.

Newsies were typically children and young adults aged anywhere from 5 years old to around 21 years old, though many of them were around 10 to 15. They were mostly from poor families and, like many people living in New York City at the time, often grew up in immigrant households. Some newsies were also orphans or from unstable homes. While some of them chose to work for pocket money, most newsies had to work long hours just to survive.

Newsies usually worked in the evening hours after they went to school. They bought papers in bulk from the publishers and sold them one at a time for a small profit. This meant that they were independent contractors because they bought copies of the paper from the newspaper publishers instead of working for the papers directly as employees.

The newsies bought papers from the publisher at 50 cents per bundle of 100 papers and then sold the papers for 1 cent a piece, meaning that they made a profit of  $\frac{1}{2}$  cent per paper. Newsies often worked late into the night to make sure they sold enough papers to make a profit. So, when the newspaper publishers raised prices, the newsies decided to try to do something about it – even though they were the underdogs fighting against publishing empires led by well-known, wealthy businessmen.



Orphaned children in the 1890s. Photograph by Jacob A. Riis. Photo sourced from the Hulton Archive, Getty Images.

## The Newsies Go on Strike

In the later 1890s, newsies began staging strikes to protest the unfair business practices of the largest newspapers, particularly *The New York World* owned by Joseph Pulitzer and the *New York Journal* owned by William Randolph Hearst. The strikes were happening because the United States was at war with Spain over Cuba's independence. Spain controlled Cuba at that time, and the Cubans wanted to be independently governed. Spain cracked down on the citizens, and Cuba looked to their neighbor, the United States, for help. The United States vowed to defend Cuba and, as a result, war broke out between the United States and Spain.



Joseph Pulitzer. Photo taken circa 1900. Photo sourced from Wikipedia.

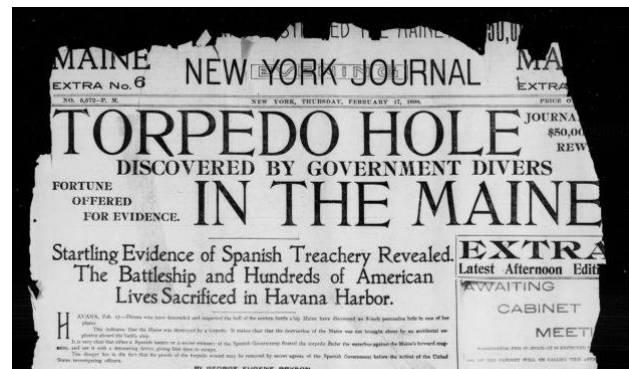


William Randolph Hearst. Photo taken circa 1910. Photo sourced from Wikipedia.

The war only spanned a few months between April and August of 1898, but tensions between Spain and the United States were brewing long before and after that as the United States became very interested in acquiring Spanish territories in parts of the Caribbean and the Philippines. Some historians claim that the stories published by Pulitzer and Hearst helped convince the American people that war was the only solution, but others note that the concern over the welfare of the Cuban people was the main factor that drove the decision to declare war on

Spain. Either way, Pulitzer and Hearst clearly benefited

from the war, as the exciting daily news led to increased paper sales. Pulitzer and Hearst were competitors battling for customers, so they often fabricated details for dramatic effect and sensationalized every story, creating a controversial journalistic style known derogatorily as yellow journalism.



Front page of the *New York Journal* from Feb. 17, 1898. Photo sourced from the Library of Congress.

## Newspaper Prices Increase

As newspaper sales increased, the *Journal* and the *World* decided to raise prices. During the war, the typical wholesale price of a bundle of 100 papers jumped from 50 cents to 60 cents. The increased sales from the war meant that the newsies could buy a bundle of papers at 60 cents and still make enough of a profit without raising their own prices over 1 cent per paper. However, once the war ended, most newspapers dropped their prices back to 50 cents per bundle – except for papers owned by Pulitzer and Hearst like the *Journal* and the *World*.

## The Newsies Strike Back

The newsies became frustrated with the higher prices and lower profit margin, so, in July 1899, nearly a year after the war ended, a group of newsies gathered and decided to impose a strike on any paper that did not drop their prices back to 50 cents per bundle.

The newsies began refusing to sell any papers owned by Pulitzer and Hearst, meaning that the two biggest newspapers in New York City had no way to get their evening editions out to customers. The newsies also hung banners and signs across the city urging the public to support them by refusing to buy the *Journal* and the *World*. The strike spread quickly throughout the boroughs of New York City and even to neighboring towns across New England. This was a huge problem for Pulitzer and Hearst, who saw their newspaper sales cut by over half during the strike.



Front page of the *New York Journal* from March 25, 1898. The paper is a prime example of yellow journalism. Photo sourced from the Library of Congress.



Newsies in Hartford, Connecticut. Photograph by Lewis Hine, March 1909. Photo sourced from Library of Congress.

## The Newsies Get Organized

The newsies were very effective organizers and began meeting in large numbers. They structured themselves into neighborhood groups and elected charismatic leaders who became the public faces of the strike. A few of the older boys named Louis “Kid Blink” Baletti, Ed “Racetrack” Higgins, and David Simmons

stepped into leadership positions in the early days of the strike. These leaders would often make impassioned speeches to gain support and gave interviews to the media to elicit sympathy. The main characters in *Newsies Jr.* are based on a combination of the major leaders of the strike. During the strike, the newsies organized a rally at Irving Hall in New York City with an estimated attendance of over 5,000. The leaders of the strike made impassioned speeches to garner support for their cause, and a state senator along with several business people and politicians spoke at the event. They urged the newsies to practice nonviolent protest tactics throughout the strike and to continue to appeal to the newspaper customers to participate in the strike along with them.

## The Strike Finally Ends

Though the strike had the goal of ending quickly when the newsies’ demands were met, in reality, it dragged on for weeks. The newsies had a harsh attitude towards scabs, who were new workers that were hired by the publishers of the *World* and *Journal* to undermine the strike and sell the papers that the newsies refused to touch. During this time, the leaders of the strike were also accused of taking bribes from the opposition, though this was likely a false story spread to sow dissent and undermine the strike leaders. As a result, the people in the leadership roles changed abruptly because of these accusations as the newsies suddenly lost trust in who they had elected to lead the strike.

Ultimately, the strike ended when the two sides finally came to a mutual agreement. In August 1899, the newspaper publishers proposed that the prices would stay at 60 cents per bundle of papers, but the publishers promised to buy back any unsold copies at the



Newsies protesting. Photograph Bettmann. Photo sourced from Getty Images.

end of the day. This meant that, though the higher prices of papers stayed, the newsies were no longer forced to work late into the night to sell all their papers just to make a small profit. The newsies accepted the terms and the strike officially ended on August 2, 1899.

## **The Impacts of the Strike on Child Labor Laws**

The strike may have only lasted a few weeks, but its message of youth empowerment, its effectiveness, and its grassroots organization became a blueprint for many other strikes and protests. The strike also had a profound effect on how Americans viewed child labor.



Though the first child labor laws were passed in the 1830s, that law only required working children to attend school for three months out of the year and continued to allow them to work long hours in dangerous conditions. Historically, children often worked in agriculture harvesting crops and taking care of livestock. Because child labor was so common in the United States by the 1900s, it

was seen as normal and acceptable. During wartime, cheap labor was needed in factories, and children were often employed in industrial settings as their high energy helped keep the assembly lines running efficiently. They were often given the most dangerous jobs and sent into cramped places like mines where adults couldn't fit.

After the newspaper strikes of the 1890s and the national shift to employ children in industrial spaces, renewed attention was brought to child labor regulations. The nonprofit National Child Labor Committee formed in 1904 with a mission to help shed light on the horrendous and dangerous conditions of child workers. The Committee hired photographer Lewis Hine to document children working jobs like newspaper sellers, coal miners, glass factory workers, and spinners in cotton mills.

Hine's photographs showed the realistic lives of child workers and helped gain public support for the reformation of child labor laws. In the first two decades of the 1900s, several legislators attempted to pass federal child labor laws, but their bills were seen as unconstitutional since the constitution gave parents the freedom to allow their children to work.

### **The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938**



12-year-old Addie Card working at a cotton mill in Vermont in 1910. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Photo sourced from Library of Congress.



A young newsie in Indianapolis, Indiana, in August 1908. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Photo sourced from Library of Congress.

However, in 1938 the Fair Labor Standards Act was finally passed. This act had a huge influence on working conditions across the country by regulating child working conditions, setting a national minimum wage, and establishing overtime pay. Interestingly, though, agricultural work did not apply to these new regulations. This meant that children continued to work in agriculture, and children over the age of 12 could work for unlimited hours before and after school. Even today, hundreds of thousands of children still work in agriculture across the United States according to the Human Rights Watch, a global nonprofit organization committed to ensuring justice, compassion, equality, and dignity for all humans. Even though the Fair Labor Standards Act didn't fix the issue of child labor overnight, it still signaled a shift in how Americans thought about child labor.

## How the Newsies Impacted the Future

Reformers pointed out that child workers often became trapped in a cycle of poverty, missed out on crucial years of schooling, and lost their chance to have a childhood. Today, it is illegal to employ children under 14 years of age, and the employers of children aged 14 to 16 must abide by strict regulations on the types of jobs and number of hours their young employees can work.

Even though it took decades of fighting for child labor reformations, child labor in the United States had drastically reduced by the 1940s, and the newsies of the 1890s finally had their message heard by the entire nation.

The events of 1899 are continuing to inspire people through productions like Thalian Association Youth Theatre's *Newsies Jr.* by telling the story of how the newsies took on the newspaper magnates – and won!



A young newsie in Sacramento, California, in May 1915. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Photo sourced from Library of Congress.



A performance of *Newsies Jr.* Photograph by Sara Arnold. Photo sourced from Sentinel & Enterprise.

## Reading Comprehension Questions

Use the knowledge you just learned about the Newsies of the 1890s to answer the following questions.

Answer each question by writing a few sentences. You can quote or reference parts of the paragraphs above in your answers.

1. What real-life events inspired the theatrical show *Newsies Jr.*?



Newsies in Hartford, Connecticut, in March 1909. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Photo sourced from Library of Congress.

2. Why were newspapers so important in the 1890s?

3. Who were the newsies? What was their role in the newspaper business?



Newsgirls waiting to collect papers in 1909.  
Photograph by Lewis Hine. Photo sourced from  
Wikipedia.

4. Why did the newsies go on strike? How did the strike impact newspaper publishers and newspaper consumers?

5. When did the strike end? What was the resolution that the newsies and newspaper publishers agreed upon to end the strike?

6. How did the strike impact how most Americans viewed child labor?



Newsies play games while waiting for papers in 1908. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Photo sourced from U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

7. Who was Louis Hine? How did his work help change how Americans thought about child labor?

8. What happened in 1938? How did this event cause a change in working conditions across the country?

9. Why did working long hours in tough industries negatively affect the lives of newsies and other child workers? What child labor laws are in place today?



A newsie out past midnight selling evening papers near the Brooklyn Bridge in 1910. Photograph by Lewis Hine. Photo sourced from Preus Museum.

10. Why does the story of the newsies continue to inspire people? How did the impact of the event of the 1890s reverberate throughout history?