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**Kids decide
what's cookin'**

Hamiltons' artistic décor

On stage with Barrier-Free Theatre

Bill Snyder: the comeback

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When 23-year-old Monica Fredericks first stepped onstage at the Manhattan Arts Center with Barrier-Free Theatre five years ago, she admits to being shy.

But then friend and fellow actor James Willms gave her some good advice: "Just be yourself—you'll come out of your shell."

And she did.

Fredericks enjoyed herself so much, she's returned every year to take part in the eight-month program offered through the Manhattan Parks and Recreation Department as part of its special populations classes. Sessions occur one afternoon a week, eventually culminating in the presentation of a 30-minute play in the spring.

The intent is that the play is completely conceived and acted by the program's participants, who are adolescents or adults with developmental or physical disabilities.

"Often, this part of our community is seen as a burden. Barrier-Free Theatre is a way to show they are a gift and have gifts to share," says Sally Bailey, a registered drama therapist, associate professor at Kansas State University and BFT's director for the past 10 years.

Class auditions—to demonstrate that students are able and willing to participate—are in early September. Members sign a contract agreeing to three stipulations: They will come to rehearsal, they will participate and they will respect other people.



From left, Julie Roth, Monica Fredericks and Michael Carpenter get in character.

stage PRESENCE

Barrier-Free Theatre entertains and supports Manhattan's own

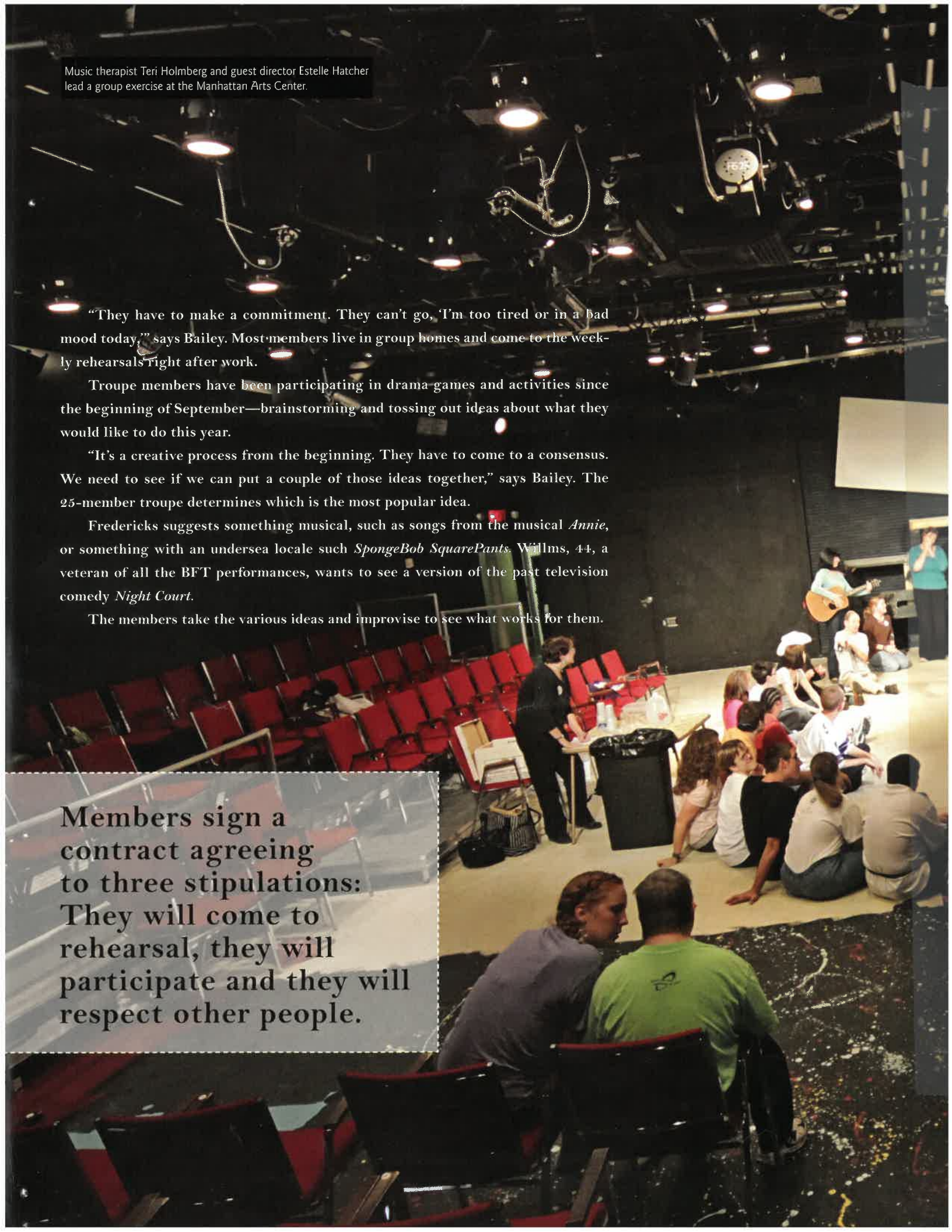
Michael Carpenter peers through a makeshift telescope, practicing for a big scene.



STORY BY
ROBIN FARRELL
EDMUNDS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ALAN HONEY



Music therapist Teri Holmberg and guest director Estelle Hatcher lead a group exercise at the Manhattan Arts Center.

“They have to make a commitment. They can’t go, ‘I’m too tired or in a bad mood today,’” says Bailey. Most members live in group homes and come to the weekly rehearsals right after work.

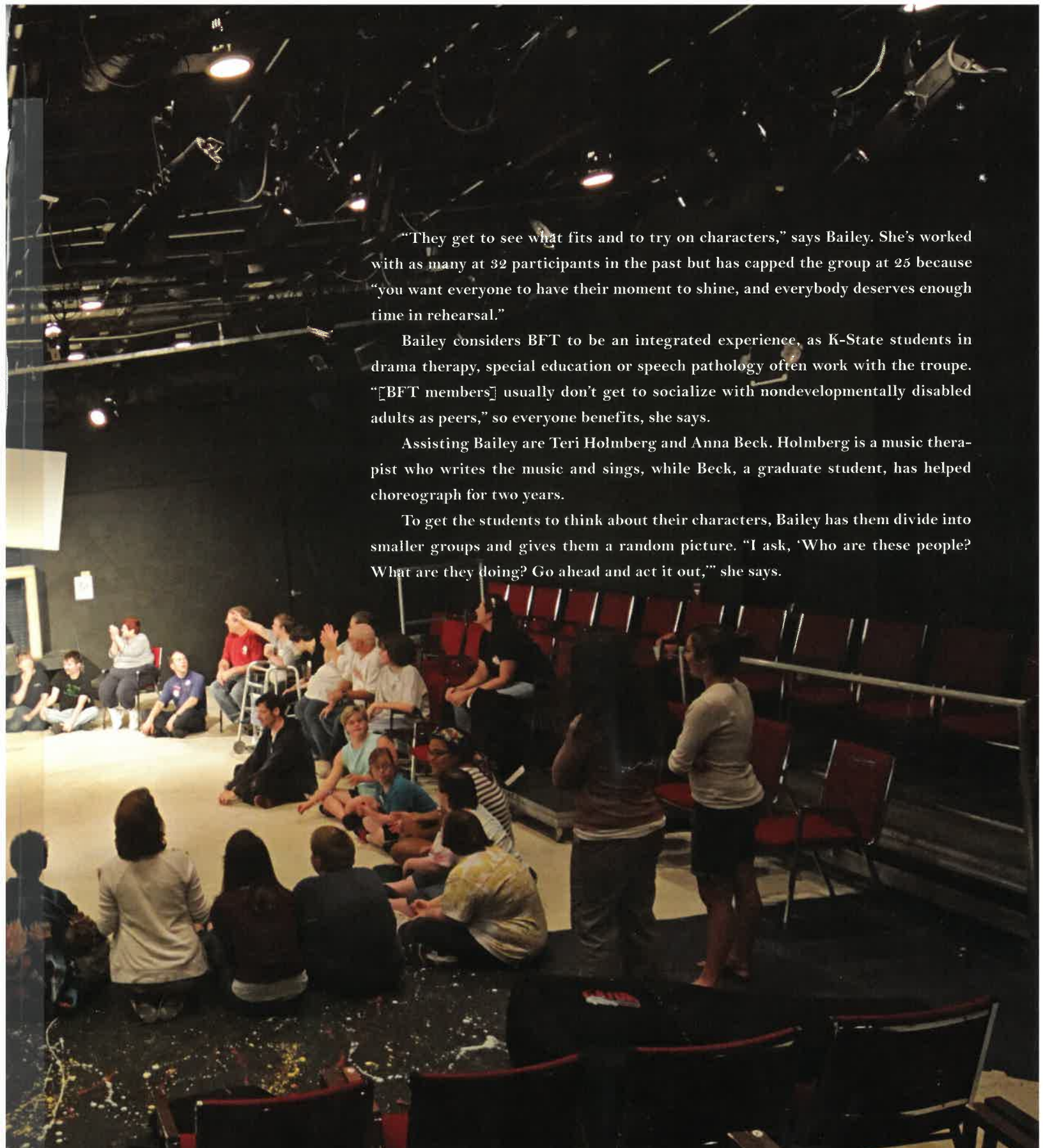
Troupe members have been participating in drama games and activities since the beginning of September—brainstorming and tossing out ideas about what they would like to do this year.

“It’s a creative process from the beginning. They have to come to a consensus. We need to see if we can put a couple of those ideas together,” says Bailey. The 25-member troupe determines which is the most popular idea.

Fredericks suggests something musical, such as songs from the musical *Annie*, or something with an undersea locale such *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Willms, 44, a veteran of all the BFT performances, wants to see a version of the past television comedy *Night Court*.

The members take the various ideas and improvise to see what works for them.

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“They get to see what fits and to try on characters,” says Bailey. She’s worked with as many as 32 participants in the past but has capped the group at 25 because “you want everyone to have their moment to shine, and everybody deserves enough time in rehearsal.”

Bailey considers BFT to be an integrated experience, as K-State students in drama therapy, special education or speech pathology often work with the troupe. “[BFT members] usually don’t get to socialize with nondevelopmentally disabled adults as peers,” so everyone benefits, she says.

Assisting Bailey are Teri Holmberg and Anna Beck. Holmberg is a music therapist who writes the music and sings, while Beck, a graduate student, has helped choreograph for two years.

To get the students to think about their characters, Bailey has them divide into smaller groups and gives them a random picture. “I ask, ‘Who are these people? What are they doing? Go ahead and act it out,’” she says.

➔ **This year’s performance dates are April 2-3, 2010.**


TICKETS TO THE PERFORMANCES AT THE MANHATTAN ARTS CENTER ARE AVAILABLE THROUGH THE MANHATTAN PARKS AND RECREATION DEPARTMENT, (785) 587-2757.

“I like seeing everybody with happy faces and smiling and feeling good about themselves.”

— JULIE ROTH



Amy Kells, foreground, leads a dance with Nita Smith, Curtis Whitney, Tina Sorell, Michael Pearson and various staff members.



“Creativity is in everyone. My hope is that it gives them skills they can take away to their everyday lives.”

— SALLY BAILEY

Sally Bailey has served as director of Barrier-Free Theatre since 1999.