

Having fun, building confidence is Ehrlich's law

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It's Thursday morning and lawyer Perry Ehrlich has got to get back to the office. But first he has to dance to the 1969 song *Aquarius* in a practice hall with 48 children.

"Hey, this is my song," he shouts, joining the young dancers who range in age from six to 15. Ehrlich raises his arms and sways to "Let the sun shine ..."

"When I went to high school, this was our final graduation-night song," he tells them.

The children giggle, clearly new to the music of Ehrlich's youth. They are dressed in hippie costume — head bands, flared pants, macrame, covered in peace symbols — and look like they've stepped out of an episode of *Rhoda*.

No sooner is Ehrlich on the dance floor than he's back in his chair, explaining the challenge of working with children from a variety of backgrounds.

"Some are on dance scholarship, others have never danced before," he says, not taking his eyes from the dancers. "The challenge is to find a balance."

If there's a challenge here, you get the feeling Ehrlich, 44, is up for it. He has the type of synergistic energy that could launch a dozen Broadway musicals.

Ehrlich is a full-time business lawyer, but he's also program director of a children's musical summer camp called *Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance!*

When he's not at the camp, he's co-director of the children's performance choir *Sound Sensation* — that is, when he's not teaching music elsewhere, com-



IAN LINDSAY/Vancouver Sun

MUSIC MAN: Perry Ehrlich and his Jewish Community Centre troupe.

posing songs or playing piano.

Charlotte Diamond recorded his song *One Dream* and with musical partners Simon Isherwood and Douglas Macaulay, he has written music for CBC TV.

"The joke is, people say, 'What you do is so far away from musical theatre.' But it's not, because the truth of the matter is, in every good lawyer there's an actor," says Ehrlich, who played piano in Saskatchewan dinner clubs to get through the University of Saskatchewan's law school.

"There's a lot of [lawyers] who have a showbiz past, or love to perform, because they take that with them."

Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! is in its third summer and runs two packed, month-long sessions at the Jewish Community Centre in Vancouver.

The camp, operated by four professional instructors, is set up like a school. The day starts with a group meeting and warmup session, followed by five classes in voice training, choreography, acting, dance, costume or set design.

By the end of the session, Ehrlich sees children initially struck dumb by shyness transformed into parading stage hams. They show off their transforming new talents with a final public performance at the centre's Norman Rothstein Theatre, a near-perfect parroting of adult Broadway.

But unlike an adult, a six-year-old singing her lungs out to *Bye Bye Birdie* can do it off key and still be charming.

"One thing that singing, playing piano and being in musicals did for me is it gave me the confidence without fear to

go into job interviews, to walk into corporate boardrooms, to deal with people who are adverse to my interests," he says.

"For me, the word is self-esteem and confidence. I'm not doing this so they'll be Cyd Charisses or Fred Astaires, or win Tonys or Oscars."

The children begin a run-through of the big show. They sing *A Simple Melody* in harmony and have divided into groups around the dance floor.

Ehrlich watches like a doting father (in fact, his daughter is among them). Mid-song, he runs over and adjusts one girl's arms.

"That was great," he shouts when they're done. "But we have a long way to come. I'm not singling you out," he says to the little girl, "but if you don't know what to do, what do you do, everybody?"

Almost in sync, they scream: "Fake it." His advice extends beyond the rehearsal hall.

"The thing is," he continues breathlessly, "the stage is a very safe place for them where they can be themselves and put a smile on their face and be happy. I wasn't a shy kid, but I can tell you honestly that growing up in the Prairies in the '60s ... I was a kid who was not athletic, and I always felt I was different, that I was second-rate. I don't want these kids to feel that way."

The Gotta Sing! Gotta Dance! performance of Dollars and Nonsense is tonight and Thursday at 7:30 p.m., with a matinee Thursday at 1 p.m. Tickets are \$10. The Norman Rothstein Theatre is at 950 West 41st Ave. Call 257-5111 for more information.