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# Special Olympian Sydney Weigand stars in Ground Floor Theatre's 'Amy and the Orphans'

McNeil High School graduate carries comic drama on her slender shoulders

By **Michael Barnes**, Columnist  
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 Gift Article











Cathie Sheridan, Adam Donmoyer, Giselle De La Rosa and Sydney Weigand attempt to figure out their futures in "Amy and the Orphans" at Ground Floor Theatre.  
Lens of Athena Photography



Listen Now: Special Olympian Sydney Weigand stars in Ground Floor Theatre's 'Amy and the Orphans'

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Amy has seen good days and bad days.

Mostly good of late.

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The titular character in “Amy and the Orphans” by Lindsey Ferrentino — playwright of the Broadway-bound “The Queen of Versailles” — saw much worse during her childhood.

Two-thirds of the way through this 90-minute comic drama, which plays at Ground Floor Theatre through Aug. 30, we learn that Amy, a woman with Down syndrome, once lived at the notorious Willowbrook State School on Staten Island. There, people with disabilities were routinely neglected, abused and beaten. It closed in 1987.

“Amy and the Orphans” — the second part of the title refers to her older brother and sister who are emotionally at sea after losing their mother, then their father — doesn’t linger on the Willowbrook scandal.

Yet once one makes the historical connection, the implications can’t be ignored. Did Amy’s family know how bad the conditions were? How, in the past and the present, can they possibly mend their lives?

## Finding just the right Amy

Crisply written by Ferrentino, who said she was inspired by an aunt with Down syndrome, and sensitively directed by rising talent Maryanna Tollemache, the weight of “Amy and the Orphans” rests, however, on the slender shoulders of actor Sydney Weigand.

Weigand, a 27-year-old graduate of McNeil High School — where she appeared in two plays — and an alumna of the University of Texas, excelled at Special Olympics. A woman with Down syndrome, she earned more than 300 medals across 10 sports, including swimming and tennis, during 19 years of competition.

Weigand plays Amy as someone who can hold her own in almost any situation. Her default responses are often well-performed lines from movies. Monthly family trips to a movie theater were among her only contacts with her family during her youth. Now she lives with a certain amount of independence, guided by a wise, patient state guardian (the serene Giselle De La Rosa).

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"Parts of Amy's life are really so sad," Weigand said during a post-curtain interview at Ground Floor. "But she has a good life. She ends up liking life."

## How did this show reach the Austin stage?

It should be said right away that the cast is uniformly good, if a little shouty and overbearing compared with Weigand and De La Rosa. Austin veteran Cathie Sheridan plays the sister who slowly reveals her abject loneliness late in life, while Adam Donmoyer is the brother who would like to make things better, but can't see beyond his limitations. Although they are not immediately identified as such, Meredith O'Brien and Justin Smith appear in flashbacks as the young parents struggling with what to do about Amy.

Not long ago, this play, which premiered Off-Broadway in 2018, would not have found a home in Austin. Yet producer Lisa Scheps has gone beyond mere slogans, making this East Austin institution, [Ground Floor Theatre](#), a "theater for everyone." The range of people and subject matter represented onstage is truly astounding.

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Although Ground Floor's venue has been carved from an old industrial site, it sometimes feels like the center of theater in this city.

Talent seems to gush from its walls. Tollemache, who grew up in Austin and graduated from McCallum High School, makes her full-scale directorial debut with this show. She previously appeared in "Next to Normal" at Ground Floor as part of a half-deaf, half-hearing cast. She says Scheps has encouraged her every step of the way, especially seeing shows through a "disability lens."

## How did they find Weigand?

"We reached out to the Down Syndrome Association of Central Texas," Tollemache says. "They helped us throw out a wide net for talent. Sydney submitted an audition video and that was that."

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Sydney's mother, Delanie Weigand, helped with the process. About her daughter, she says Sydney is the "queen of the one-liners."

Indeed, the young actor's timing is uncanny. Still, she was surprised by the sheer number of Amy's lines and the occasional cussing.

"I'd like to do more plays," Weigand says, "but without curse words."

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COLUMNIST



I write about the people, places, culture and history of Austin and Texas.

A native Texan, I earned my Ph.D at the University of Texas. First as an arts reporter and critic, I've written for the Austin American-Statesman for 36 years. I'm pleased to join the Hearst Texas family of newspapers.

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