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Kate Wetherhead and Michael Croiter edit an episode of the web series 'Submissions Only.' Below, Chita Rivera joins Ms. Wetherhead on the show.

Spooing the Art of Getting the Part

By LAURA HEDLI

On the new Broadway-centric NBC series "Smash," Karen Cartwright (played by Katharine McPhee) is the quintessential underdog, a doe-eyed lowan with Broadway dreams. On the new web series "Submissions Only," which will present the sixth monthly episode in its second season on Friday, Penny Reilly is another type of underdog—one who knows that landing the second national tour of "Mean Girls: The Musical" doesn't mean you're popular. Like Karen, Penny isn't booking much, but she's always in auditions.

"Submissions Only" follows the day-to-day life of Penny (played by Kate Wetherhead) and her friend Tim (Colin Hanlon), who runs a casting agency. It was created in 2010 by Ms. Wetherhead and fellow stage actor Andrew Keenan-Bolger, both of whom wanted to explore creative pursuits beyond acting. Given their knowledge of the industry, they thought it would be fun to produce a behind-the-scenes look at the highs and lows of auditioning.

"I think anytime there's a big show on a network, people are also looking for: what's the indie, step-child version of this, the real DIY version?" Mr. Keenan-Bolger said. That's what we are.

Despite being in rehearsals these days for his role as Crutchie in the forthcoming production of "Newsies," Mr. Keenan-Bolger does most of the directing, filming and editing for "Submissions Only." Ms. Wetherhead writes every episode and helps with other areas of production. It's a full-time job without the steady paycheck. In fact, her compensation each month is more like an allowance. But then, this is no network production.

"We're not like a multi-camera sitcom where there's a joke every three lines," said Ms. Wetherhead. "There's more of a slow burn to what we do."

The entire second season of the show, comprising eight 15- to 20-minute episodes, will cost about \$38,000 to make. (That's a significant increase from the first season, which cost about \$2,500.) The majority of the funding



comes from an online Kickstarter campaign that raised more than \$22,000. The remainder will come from a new partnership with the website BroadwayWorld.com and individual donors. Actors, crew and creatives are paid close to minimum wage; rental costs were trimmed con-

A web-only series gives young theater artists the chance to stretch their talents.

siderably when Pearl Studios donated space to the production team. (Mr. Keenan-Bolger's manager and Roundabout Theatre Company also donate space.)

At its heart, the series is something of a love letter, tinged with satire, to the theater world and the people who toil within it. Storylines have included a play that gets almost completely recast once it lands in New York after its out-of-town tryout; an accident involving a faulty harness; and a new-agey director who makes Tim crazy with his casting requests.

"I think there's a weird stigma in the TV-film world that theater people can't be funny and understand subtlety, and I think that could not be more wrong," said Mr. Keenan-Bolger. "We definitely wanted to get some attention in the community and create opportunities for our friends to get to work together on film."

Aside from actors, the series also offers exposure to several composers who are commissioned to write new music for each episode.

Mr. Keenan-Bolger and Ms. Wetherhead met while performing in "It's a Bird...It's a Plane...It's Superman," at the Dallas Theater Center in the summer of 2010. With almost zero filmmaking experience, they released the first episode of "Submissions Only" on YouTube in October 2010, then posted the link on Facebook, Twitter and Mr. Keenan-Bolger's blog.

"One of the reasons it felt like a fairly reasonable venture was that Andrew already had an existing blog that had a built-in following of at least 2,000 people," Ms. Wetherhead said. "There are people out there trying to do what we're doing who don't have a built-in audience, and I think that's the primary challenge they face. At least we had our network of friends to market it to."

Viewership now hovers around 20,000 per episode. While BroadwayWorld.com puts no restrictions on content, it does stipulate that the series run as an exclusive on its site. In exchange for a monthly stipend and increased visibility among a focused audience of theater fans, episodes of "Submissions Only" are no longer uploaded to YouTube, where they might reach a more general demographic.

"They receive a monthly fee per episode, plus a bonus if they reach a certain number of hits," said Jaron Caldwell of O&M Co., the public-relations firm that

now represents the show. "Thus far, they have exceeded the requested number of hits for every episode."

The gradually widening fanbase is cause for optimism, as are newly minted deals with O&M Co., and Tara Rubin Casting, which came aboard to help find talent. The new episode features appearances by Condola Rashad and Mark Kudisch, plus New York Post theater columnist Michael Riedel (who will also be on an upcoming episode of "Smash.")

Ms. Wetherhead and Mr. Keenan-Bolger said they've never lacked willing participants with bankable names. In the first season, Kristin Chenoweth, Chita Rivera and several other Broadway notables volunteered their time to be part of the show.

"It's like Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon, but maybe it's only three degrees in the theater world," said Mr. Keenan-Bolger, explaining how "Submissions Only" has attracted so much talent. Jeff Croiter, who is Ms. Wetherhead's husband and also the lighting designer on "Newsies," regularly helps film the show and is a producer. His brother, Michael Croiter, an Emmy award-winning sound designer, sound-edits each episode, often adding instrumentation.

Even with all the generosity, though, Ms. Wetherhead and Mr. Keenan-Bolger know that producing a third season of "Submissions Only" will require more money.

"None of us want to continue working this hard without some sort of compensation," Ms. Wetherhead said. "The need for a sponsor, or producing entities, or donors, whatever shape it ends up taking, will be determined over an undetermined amount of time."

Daydreaming out loud about a being picked up as an original series on Netflix, Ms. Wetherhead acknowledged the creative possibilities afforded by the current arrangement, however financially tenuous: "It's important to appreciate the artistic freedom when you have it, and to understand that as soon as you pursue something beyond your own resources, that compromise is inevitable."