

McKnight Journal

Young thespians prepare for performances

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Staff Writer

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Accountants aren't the only ones with "taxing" April agendas.

Young thespians belonging to Spotlight Performing Arts Inc. in West View are working arduously to put the finishing touches on three spring performances -- "Alice in Wonderland," "Once Upon a Mattress" and "Les Miserables" -- which will soon be coming to St. Barnabas Health System's Kean Theater.

"These plays require a lot of teamwork on the part of the students," said Beth Walter, director of theater at Spotlight.

"We, as directors, have had difficulty managing times because the kids have so much on their plates between homework and other school plays. But you can really tell that they love doing this so much."

"Alice in Wonderland" will hit the stage on Saturday, April 29, at 6:30 p.m. and Sunday, April 30, at 12:30 p.m. The play, based on the classic tale written and illustrated by Lewis Carrol, will be presented by the theater company's elementary school students.

"For a lot of them, this is their first acting role with speaking and singing lines," Walter explained. "But they really work hard and you'd be surprised at what a lot of these younger kids can do. They take this seriously, and a lot of them came to rehearsals with their lines already memorized."

The lead role of Alice will be played by third-grader Christine Brown. The performance will feature a few songs from the Disney "Alice in Wonderland" soundtrack.

"Parents really enjoy seeing their children on stage for the first time and usually bring a lot of friends and relatives," Walter said.

"Once Upon a Mattress" will follow "Alice in Wonderland" at 8 p.m. on Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday as part of a double matinee. Admission to both shows costs \$12 for adults and \$10 for children 18-and-younger.

The performance, a droll retelling of Hans Christian Anderson's book "The Princess and the Pea," takes the audience on a magical journey to a faraway kingdom where the townspeople are forbidden to marry until the queen can find a suitable bride for her son, the prince.

The cast is comprised of students in grades six through eight.

"The play was written for adults, so this is a real challenge to them," Walter said. "Comedy tends to be more difficult to perform than drama, and it's really hard to give children a sense of comedic timing."

Nevertheless, Walter said things have been coming together nicely the past few weeks, especially with the lead character of Princess Winnifred, played by sixth-grader Stephanie Higgins.

"She's absolutely cut out for this role," Walter said. "She has a very strong musical-theater voice that is mature well beyond her years. She sounds like an adult when she sings, but then you see her and you're surprised at how young she is."

An intermission with refreshments will be held between both shows.

High school students at Spotlight will present "Les Miserables" on Friday and Saturday, May 18 and 19, at 7:30 p.m.; Friday, May 26, at 7:30 p.m.; and Saturday, May 27, at 2 and 8 p.m.

Admission will also be \$12 for adults and \$10 for children 18-and-younger.

"Les Miserables," based on the novel by Victor Hugo, follows the life of Jean Val Gean, who was imprisoned for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his starving family. He later broke his parole and alluded French authorities by assuming a new identity as a mayor -- a position that allowed him to reach out to the impoverished.

The lead role is played by high school junior Connor Mrozowski. The majority of the cast hails from local schools.

"The rehearsals have been really intense because this is a musical," Walter said. "It's like an opera, but sung in English. For us, 'Les Miserables' is the pinnacle of achievement because it's known to be very challenging and few theater schools in the area have attempted it."

Kean Theater is located at 5847 Meridian Road in Gibsonia.

For details, call Spotlight Performing Arts Inc. at 412-931-1001.