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## Alice, a Mad Musical Adventure!

03.03.11 - 11:47 pm

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DURHAM -- "We had the best of educations -- in fact, we went to school every day," the Mock Turtle (played by Romay Williams) tells Alice (played by Stella Angrist) during a recent rehearsal at Trinity United Methodist Church.



That schooling, the Turtle tells a bewildered Alice, included courses in "Reeling and Writhing," "the different branches of Arithmetic -- Ambition, Distraction, Uglification and Derision," and the classics, "Laughing and Grief."



If this wordplay sounds familiar, it should. The lines are from "Alice, a Mad Musical Adventure!," an original adaptation of "Alice in Wonderland" and other books by Lewis Carroll. Jenny Justice wrote the original script adaptation and is directing the play. Ryan Gunzel collaborated with Justice to compose the songs, and Leslie Heal Ray is music director. Callie Justice, Justice's sister, composed music to one of the tunes.

"Alice," which opens today, is also the first production of the new Durham Family Theatre, which Justice and her co-artistic director Dorothy Clark started. Justice's extensive theater resume includes work with New Shakespeare Company of San Francisco, Boston's Ends & Means Committee, and more recently with Walltown Children's Theatre, Durham Public Schools and the Durham Arts Council.

When she was working on a master's degree in Boston, she "really fell in love with the idea of intergenerational audiences" and began teaching classes for children and adults. While she applauds Durham's local theaters, she saw a

missing piece.

"I kept thinking, there's something missing," Justice said. "We've got lots of wonderful theaters, but we don't have a community theater."

In a city like Durham, with its wide ethnic diversity, Justice sees theater as a tool for building community.

"In this town we have the chance to really build an authentically diverse community theater that would bring all of our communities together in positive ways," she said.

In keeping with the community theater goals, this production has actors from ages 8 to 66 with different ranges of experience. Angrist, 11, has been to some summer theater camps. The most challenging part of playing Alice is the memory work. "I have a lot of lines and I have to memorize them all," Angrist said.

This production is the first theatrical experience for Miles Stevenson, 11, who plays the King of Hearts. For him, the challenge of the role has been imitating the voice of an older person with authority. "I try to talk with a deep voice as the King of Hearts, who is supposed to be an older person," he said. He's had a good experience, would like to try other acting roles and was excited as opening day drew near -- "kind of enthusiastic yet scared, kind of happy. It's going to all come together very well," he said.

On the other hand, Williams, the Mock Turtle, calls herself a "mature actor," not just in years but experience -- he's acted in other local companies and in independent films. Acting in a children's play is a first for her. "I'm not a singer," Williams said. "I'm doing something I never thought I'd do: singing and dancing in a kids' show."

David Katzenmeyer, who plays the Caterpillar and March Hare, said his roles are the first since he acted in his college days. When he took his daughter Krista, who plays the Fawn, to audition, he decided to try out as well. While rehearsals have been a challenge, he likes sharing time with his daughter and getting in touch with his artistic side.

"I had forgotten about that side of my life," Katzenmeyer said. "My daughter is very academically talented, and we want to nurture that artistic side as well. I think as adults we forget that we have an artistic side."

At this rehearsal, the Caterpillar, during a scene with Alice, is sitting on a mushroom sculpted with papi r-mach  (to be painted and completed before today's production). Katzenmeyer and his daughter built the mushroom, and he built a special table for the Mad Hatter scene.

Whether community or professional theater, Justice said she believes in high quality, and at this rehearsal Ray is leading the cast through vocal warm-up exercises while Justice leads an exercise to help the actors get into character. She tells the actors that tonight's rehearsal is the last time they can call for a dropped line but not to break character if they forget a line. "I walk into the story," she says. "My goal has always been that they not see me," but to see the story, she tells the cast.

Justice chose to adapt Lewis Carroll's Alice stories because she "knew it would appeal to a wide age range." Other Alice adaptations do not always have a thematic framework, but Justice said she tries to provide that unity in her script. "I call it finding your way and finding yourself," she said, along with "themes of punishment and cruelty, and how you face that."

Music director Ray praised composer Gunzel's melodies, which she said the audience should leave singing. She also praised the cast for some quick study. "They're very intelligent, very quick to learn," with good voices, "a great representation of Durham and the talent that's here. I'm impressed," Ray said.

Justice said the theater organizers are putting together a board and are hoping to get official nonprofit status. Trinity Methodist offered the space to the theater at a generous rate, Justice said, adding that she liked the fact that it was centrally located and accessible to more people. "I've always said if you can identify the need correctly and serve the need, you'll grow," she said.

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