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Durham Family Theatre fulfilling a need

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WHAT: Durham Family Theatre's production of William Shakespeare's "As You Like It"

WHEN: Nov. 3-5 and Nov. 11-12, 8 p.m.

WHERE: St. Joseph's Performance Hall, Hayti Heritage Center, 804 Old

Fayetteville St., Durham

ADMISSION: Suggested donation of \$10 (more or less). For information, visit durhamfamilytheatre.wordpress.com.

By Cliff Bellamy

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DURHAM – Jenny Justice, one of the co-founders of Durham Family Theatre, learned years ago that the plays of William Shakespeare do not have to be intimidating. Justice said she fell in love with his works when she was 12 and began performing monologues.

Her first job in theater was with the San Francisco Shakespeare Company, where the director was Marguerite Roma, whom Justice said had a “very direct” approach to understanding Shakespeare through gesture and nuance.

“I really believe with that active approach it should be accessible to everyone,” Justice said. “I find him really accessible once you stop being afraid of him.”

This month, the Durham Family Theatre will perform Shakespeare’s comedy “As You Like It.”

Her active approach to The Bard was in evidence at a recent rehearsal. Steve Burham, in the role of Touchstone, the clown in the play, and Auntais Faulkner, playing the role of Corin the shepherd, rehearsed a scene in which the two banter about their relative status in society. Justice stopped the action and gave Burham a few pointers.

“If you’re playing with a shepherd,” Justice said, “insult him.” They begin the scene again. “There you go!” Justice said, “so feel it!”

There is a relaxed feel to this rehearsal for the Durham Family Theatre's first production of its second season, although the work is painstaking. Justice, the artistic director, keeps the actors aware of blocking, the appropriateness of gestures and vocal nuance – and what Shakespeare's language means.

Justice and Dorothy Clark co-founded Durham Family Theatre in August 2010. The theater presented its first production in March, "Alice, a Mad Musical Adventure!" Since then, the theater has formed a board of directors and advisers, and now teaches classes as well. The theater also has applied for official nonprofit status, which is pending.

The theater is Justice and Clark's gift to Durham. When Justice – an actor, storyteller and teacher – came to Durham, she saw the lack of a family theater as a huge gap in the local arts community. She and Clark set about closing the gap. Durham Family Theatre's mission is to create theater that reaches out of everyone – people of different ages, neighborhoods, ethnicities, as well as to professionals and amateurs. (Three members of the theater's 11-member advisory council are teens, Justice said.)

"Alice" had actors from ages ranging roughly from 8 to 80. "As You Like It" also has actors in their teens, as well as adults.

When auditions for "As You Like It" began, Justice noticed that only white people were auditioning. She visited a drama class at N.C. Central University, and found "a treasure trove of actors who are dying to work," she said.

She had no problem convincing the students to try out. Christine Allen, who plays Rosalind, found out about the auditions from a flier DFT placed at NCCU, where she is a student in dramatics. She decided to audition, and brought along fellow student Sherena Siler, who plays Celia, and Bradley Williams, who plays Orlando, Rosalind's suitor in the play.

Allen has acted in plays at NCCU, but "As You Like It" is her first lead role. The play also has one of Shakespeare's major roles for women, "which is a big honor," she said.

The actors praised Justice for her relaxed approach to rehearsal, and her emphasis on what Shakespeare's language means. "The chemistry between the cast members is good," Siler said. "She [Justice] helps build that chemistry. ... You see us laughing in rehearsals – that's what brings out the comedy in Shakespeare," she said.

Williams auditioned for Orlando because of the wrestling scene. He wants to be a professional wrestler someday, which he said involves a lot of acting and choreography. He choreographed the wrestling scene in the play, and studied other actors' interpretations of Orlando.

Shakespeare's language can be intimidating, even to English majors, but these actors credit Justice's approach to making it less daunting.

Burham, who also acted in "Alice," which is written by Justice and based on the works of author Lewis Carroll, teaches high school Latin, and his knowledge of that language and Greek has helped him better understand Shakespeare.

Audiences in Shakespeare's time were well versed in the classics and likely understood his jokes based on those references, he said. "I get a lot more of the jokes," Burham said.

Appreciating Shakespeare depends upon actors whose gestures make the meaning known, and he praised Justice's direction. "She is so focused on having characters who feel things. ... I think that's what makes the lines come out."

Williams said acting in a Shakespeare production had given him confidence, and exposed him to another world of drama. "I feel like if I can do Shakespeare, I can do anything," Williams said.

For the Durham Family Theatre's spring production, Justice is writing another original play, titled "Between the Bells."

She praised the support other nonprofit groups have given Durham Family Theatre. (This rehearsal was held at the Central Park School of Children.) "I'm feeling pretty good," Justice said. "It's pretty audacious to start a theater with no money, and we wouldn't be able to keep going without that support."

Like many arts organization, Durham Family Theatre struggles for funding, "but I'm feeling successful every day because every step we take we get affirmation that our mission is right," Justice said. "We're working together to create something that is needed."

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