

Finding your story: DFT to present new musical

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Cliff Bellamy

DURHAM —

Durham Family Theatre's new production has an original script, original music, green leprechaun hats, wooden swords, walking sticks, animal masks and other props that evoke ancient Ireland. But this production is primarily about stories and their importance in our world.

"Storytelling is how we create our world," said Jenny Justice, co-founder and director of Durham Family Theatre and author of "Brigid Without a Story." The play is based on an old Irish folk tale, which Justice has adapted. "I started telling this story 30 years ago," said Justice, who is a trained actor as well as a storyteller. Two years ago she began adapting the story as a play.

The story "has such rich textures and colors," she said. One day she woke up and the melody of a song came to her, and the production grew from there.

The play is set in 100 BCE in Ireland, where Queen Eire (played by Rachael Mullen) is having her harvest festival where storytellers compete for the title of queen's storyteller. Brigid the Poet (played by Korinn Annette Jefferies) is an orphan from a storytelling family. Without the support of her family and tribe, Brigid forgets her story when she competes before the queen. Queen Eire sends Brigid into exile, where she must return a ring from Eire to her sister, Queen Meara, Silkie Queen of the Sea (played by Donna Hoover). On the way, Brigid must discover her story.

Justice draws a parallel between the theme of this musical and the mission of Durham Family Theatre. Founded in 2010, the theater presents productions with actors of all ages, races, cultures and abilities. "So many of us are afraid we have no voice and are afraid to speak," Justice said. "I would say that's the whole basis of starting the Durham Family Theatre. I think the world's better when people find their voices," she said.

As an unintended illustration of what Justice is talking about, during a rehearsal last week Rachael Mullen hugged her father Donald Mullen, who plays Riordan the Brave, one of the champion storytellers in the play. For Donald Mullen, 50, this production is his first time ever acting and singing in a play or musical. His daughter, age 20, wanted to audition for "Brigid" and asked him to come along for moral support, Mullen said. "Jenny said,

'We really need some men in roles,'" and convinced him to audition. He enjoys the work, but says it's "a very big time commitment."

Playing Queen Eire requires her to imagine the thoughts and feelings of an immortal, Rachael Mullen said. "She's immortal, so she's very experienced and knows how life works. So I have to bring that all-encompassing passion to these mortals," she said.

Jefferies, who plays Brigid, did an internship with Durham Family Theatre last summer. This play is her first time acting in a DFT production. A senior at the Durham School of the Arts, she wants to get a degree in musical theater. The challenge of being Brigid the Poet is "trying to get in the mindset of being an orphan," Jefferies said. She said she is the baby of her family, but in this role she must find more independence.

"Brigid Without a Story" has 13 original songs. Justice recorded her melodies and lyrics, which she gave to music director and vocal arranger Joy Harrell-Goff, who transcribed them. Harrell-Goff gave those transcriptions to Michael A. Jones Sr., who wrote some parts for strings and other instruments that were recorded to accompany the singers.

Among the tunes are the opening and closing "In Days to Come," "Festival Bubbly Pies," and "Mother of a Leprechaun," which Justice said is an homage to the Gilbert and Sullivan song "Modern Major General." This adaptation is "I am the husband of a woman who's the mother of a leprechaun."

Go and Do

WHAT: Durham Family Theatre presentation of "Brigid Without a Story" **WHEN:** Performances begin today at 7 p.m. and continue Saturday at 2 p.m. and 5 p.m.; other performances are Feb. 14 at 7 p.m. and Feb. 15 at 2 p.m. **WHERE:** Trinity United Methodist Church, 215 N. Church St., Durham **ADMISSION:** Tickets are \$15 general admission. For information or to purchase, visit durhamfamilytheatre.wordpress.com