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Pooh gets real

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By Cliff Bellamy

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DURHAM – The characters in A.A. Milne’s classic children’s stories come to life in Durham Family Theatre’s production of “The House at Pooh Corner,” a musical adaptation of Milne’s stories by Bettye Knapp. Audiences who attend the production, opening today, should expect something different from the version

that Disney popularized in film.

Knapp’s script is truer to Milne’s stories, and his language, said Jennifer Justice, founder and director of Durham Family Theatre. She found Knapp’s adaptation about five years ago. It has Milne’s “edgy whimsy, with humor that resonates for adults and children in real ways,” Justice said. Milne’s dialogue has a rhythm and quality that she compares to that of Abbott and Costello. “We’ve finally got to that place in rehearsals where we’re laughing all the time,” she said.

At a recent rehearsal (the theater uses Central Park School for rehearsal space) Margaret Elam, 13, who plays Eeyore, said her character is “a little more saucy” in this play than the Eeyore of Disney’s version.

“The characters in the play are more built up than in the movies,” Elam said. “They have their little quirks and their songs. ... I believe it’s a little more real,” she said.

In Knapp’s play, Christopher Robin (played by Luke Beyer, a Durham School of the Arts student) calls a “ ’mergency meeting” because he is being “sent to education.” Robin does not want to leave his friends in the Hundred Acre Wood. Beyer’s role is crucial to the basic theme of the play, which Justice calls “the pure love of innocence and the rightful loss of that innocence.” For Christopher, the story “is about becoming aware of losing his childhood,” understanding what he will gain, “but also acknowledging the loss,” Justice said.

Durham Family Theatre began in 2010 with the goal of presenting productions for all skill levels and all ages, and employing a diverse cast. The role of Pooh is played by 8-year-old Rosemary Betts, whose mom, Robin Rancer Betts, plays the role of Rabbit. “It’s a nice mother-daughter thing,” Robin Betts said of their participation. “We run lines at home,” she said, adding that her daughter wakes

up singing tunes from the show. Rosemary says her love of singing is one of several ways in which she is like the Pooh character.

Nicole Marsh said her daughter Kailey Grace, 7, a member of the rabbits' chorus, got interested in the production when Justice, who leads a theater class at E.K. Powe, where Kailey attends, suggested she try out for the show.

At this rehearsal, Justice and music director Joy Harrell focus on smoothing transitions between spoken parts and songs, what Justice calls "acting into the song." She is pleased after the cast finishes the first song, "Tiddely pom." "Do you see how well your energy went into these songs," she tells the cast. "That's what I thought you needed to work on."

Harrell has written arrangements of the songs (written by H. Fraser-Simson) for a small orchestra, which will be recorded. At this rehearsal, Harrell cues up music on computer, conducts and works on entrances – and enunciation. "Don't forget your consonants!" she tells the cast as they work through a chorus of Christopher Robinson's song "If I Were King."

Rheanna Pidgeon, 13, is assistant director, and she does everything from help move props to draw patterns to help fit the actors for dance slippers. When some of the cast are missing, at Justice's request, she gets on the phone to make sure they are on their way. During one moment, Pidgeon cajoles her peers to get back in focus. Justice calls her "my substitute mom."

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WHAT: Durham Family Theatre production of "The House at Pooh Corner"

WHEN: March 9, 10, 16 and 17 at 7 p.m.; March 10 and 17 at 1 p.m.

WHERE: Whitford Hall, Duke Memorial United Methodist Church, 504 W. Chapel Hill St.

ADMISSION: Tickets are \$12 for adults, \$10 for children. To purchase in advance, visit durhamfamilytheatre.wordpress.com

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