

Sonora troupe sends kids to the boards



Tuolumne Talk

Harmony Wheeler

It's amazing how fast time goes by. With the Youth Entertainment Stage Company production of "Willy Wonka" playing in Modesto, memories come flooding back to this YES Company alumni and friend of the arts. I grew up on the stage and, despite the fact that I ultimately realized I didn't have all that much stage talent, theater played a major role in my development and growth from a selfish only child to a slightly less selfish young adult.

It breaks my heart to see the arts disappear and lose funding in schools, but groups like YES Company and, a bit closer to home, the Mountain Youth and Community Theatre, uplift my spirit with their ongoing work at bringing theater to youth in the community. MYACT recently performed a version of "Into the Woods Jr." and it will present "Beauty and the Beast Jr." this weekend at its theater in Sonora, which, theatergoers may be happy to learn, recently acquired its own air conditioner.

But there's more to motivate attendance than an escape from the heat.

"This program is completely funded by the community and our patrons," said MYACT Executive Director Kayla Meyer. "The students work extremely hard to put on an entertaining and professional show. Theater needs an audience. Our students need to feel the support of their community. We've been around for eight years and many people still don't know who we are. Many of our students move on to Connections and Sierra Repertory Theatre, some have joined the Young Americans. Our older students teach classes or help design elements of shows."

Meyer certainly has enough motivation. Proudly stating that these kids are her life, she'll tell you that

in addition to working 40 hours a week for Timberline Environmental Services and being involved in ministries at Sierra Bible Church, she spends 20 to 40

hours each week working on various projects for MYACT. Meyer founded the theater company with friend John Williams (not the composer) after graduating with her degree in theater arts from Sonoma State University.

"We are a musical theater family," Meyer said. "We teach students self-confidence and leadership alongside the performing arts."

The company started as a group of 13 students with a summer camp eight years ago and has grown to include year-round after-school classes with 30 students, community shows and summer camps with about 50 students each year.

Originally called Meyer Hideout Inc., the troupe absorbed Sonora Children's Theatre last year and now goes by Mountain Youth and Community Theatre. It started with one show and has expanded to presenting three to four shows a year, in addition to three recitals and several community events. The group started working with kids ages 8 to 12 and has since expanded to welcome children as young as 3 years old, high school students and adults to participate. The casting starts as early as March, when MYACT holds a two-day workshop to prepare students for auditions. Rehearsals start in April and summer camp starts in June. The intense summer camp includes three to four weeks of blocking and vocal rehearsals, as well as prop and set preparations, swimming activities, weekly field trips and a final three-day camping trip after the shows have ended.

"The students that have been with



Courtesy photo

Mountain Youth and Community Theatre Executive Director Kyla Meyer, left, with Alexandria Dowie, Courtney Moreno, Morgan Fitzpatrick, Dominic Moreno, Jonathan Kristopovich and Natalie Gill at a recent field trip to the Fallon House Theatre.

"Beauty and the Beast Jr."

WHEN: 7 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday

WHERE: MYACT Theatre, 14372 Cuesta Court, Sonora

TICKETS: \$8 at mountainyouthact.com

me for eight years are like sisters and brothers to each other and myself," Meyer said. "I want to see these students succeed, I want others to see their hard work and talent and I know the students benefit in so many ways aside from the performing arts. The students are together for six solid weeks, living and breathing theater and each other. Big kids, little kids, there are no divisions. Once a Hideout Kid, always a Hideout Kid."

The kids who get involved stick with MYACT. Sydney Sheffield, 15,

plays Belle in "Beauty and the Beast Jr.," her fourth show with MYACT.

"I love Hideout and it's very fun," said Ricki Lee, 12, who started with the company at age 5. "I learn a lot and it's a great experience."

Janae Perkins, 16, who joined MYACT at age 10, agrees.

"Hideout has been a wonderful experience for me," she said. "It is my life now."

Send your Tuolumne County events to Harmony Wheeler at hwheeler@sierralodestar.com and mtaylor@sierralodestar.com.

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surely see many more, but it's watching them grow through this production to that one, from a chorus line role to a lead, that I grin myself. I wish these young thespians all the happiness that a wonderful performance can instill in a person and hope that their lives remain

filled with approving applause.

As for Kathy, Ann and Amy, their antics are keeping the Acme Theater Anvil at bay for another season. Theirs is an act of kindness that can almost not be repaid. The ovations are theirs, too.

Reach Mike Taylor at mtaylor@sierralodestar.com.

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