

Young Actors Workshop sings the body aesthetic

Stacy Trevenon

Biology class was never like this. Disneyland never got close. But leave it to the fertile imaginations of Young Actors' Workshop students to bring biology and Disney together in a way that's creative, magical and delightfully theatrical. That's what awaits audiences in YAW's latest original production, "Camp-in-the-Body." Beginning May 4, audiences will find themselves seated on an imaginary tram, taking a tour of a summer camp inside the human body. At every turn, they encounter physiological personae that would have made Frankenstein grin: bright red blood cells busily transporting oxygen, white blood cells marching against invaders, enzymes in hard hats, willful dreams of the brain and sneering flu germs. They're all young YAW students on the youth theater troupe's annual outing: conceiving and creating a production, allowing improvisational main and side story lines to evolve, and perfecting a production that blends entertainment and education. "We were thinking all kinds of wonderful ideas," said 14-year-old Sad Warner, who came up with the germ of the idea. Typically, YAW plays begin when director Auri Naggar brainstorms with students until one idea emerges and the students cultivate it into a main story with sidelines. "Camp-in-the-Body" began when the students considered that they would have many kids and parents in one place (the large Cunha Intermediate School multipurpose room, where YAW productions are staged), and wanted to unify them. From there, the kids toyed with the idea of a large family get-together. That morphed into a summer camp. "There were lots of ideas, from outer space to a different time period and finally to the body," said Naggar. Then Warner suggested a summer camp in the body. That met with controversy, Naggar said. Older actors liked it. Younger ones didn't. "They didn't want to be parts of the body. The body's gross," he said. But as they created roles of heart and blood cells as campers and counselors, the kids stirred to life the idea of summer camp in the body. The red cells, identified by red pants and shirts with big red balloons, carry needed things like oxygen through the body. The white cells fight off infections "like the Army," said ninth-grade red cell Carina Woudenberg. And, using the technique Naggar calls "guided improvisation," the students began creating personalities that infiltrated and circulated onstage. "We decided what the cells were like, (that) they were organized and watching the time. They had to get from here to there in that much time," Woudenberg said. "After that, the characters started to develop." Audience members are cast as relatives and friends who board a tram for a camp tour. The tram starts in the brain and visits three cabins: the bone marrow/Red Blood Cell cabin, the lymph node/White Blood Cell cabin, and the heart. The tour is musical. Throughout rehearsals, the young actors created songs that include "We Are Here to Protect the Body," "The Hard-Hat Workers," "The Endoplasmic Reticulum" and more. "I'm a person who announces that a message is coming in from the brain or the heart," said fifth grader Oriana Doria-Quesada, of her role in the Endocrine Mail System. The tour also encounters the Brain's emotions, as young actors portray Funniness, Silliness, Rage, Fear, Paranoia and more. The visitors get glimpses of the Brain's dreams, which wind about in abstract, dreamlike fashion. One dream concerns a Bald Baboon hunting with a shovel for freckles to eat and being thwarted by two dwarves with a magic potion. The second concerns a gnome being chased by a witch into a castle occupied by fairy princesses with a pet fox, who are seeking to summon a sorceress to make their evil queen mother more nice. "There are a lot of tie-ins, almost abstract," said Naggar. "The point is, they make the body agitated and the brain has to do something to stabilize it." The agitation doubles when the tram makes an unexpected detour to the pancreas, where the visitors meet the unpleasant London Flu. With names like Queasy, Wheezy, Sneezy and Sleazy, the germs are nastily plotting to get to the Brain and take over the body, singing "We Are the London Flu." "We're very belligerent with bad English accents," announced Patrick Murphy, the seventh-grader who plays Sleazy. While the germs delight in playing the biological bad guys, they also admit to being on their toes in an improvisational play. While the actors follow the general storyline, the improvised dialogue is different in each performance. The actors say they can't depend on word-for-word cues as they might using scripts. The play seems to be on an educational as well as entertainment track, say the actors. "Actually, I am learning about biology," said Doria-Quesada. "I didn't know red blood cells carried oxygen" until her sister, Sophia, who plays a Red Blood Cell Camper, told her. "It's cool because the audience might imagine a camp inside the body. They might learn something," said Warner, a science lover who noted that she might someday go into veterinary medicine. "(Kids) might get more interested in science or things inside the body. Like red blood cells." "Camp-in-the-Body" will run for two weekends, at 7:30 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. on Sundays, from May 4 through 13. Tickets at \$6 are available at box offices in Eriksen Art and Framing and Bay Book Company, and also at the door. For further information about Young Actors' Workshop, contact Naggar at 726-1304.