

Honesty is best onstage

By Stacy Trevenon--[stacy@hmbreview.com]

In an old fable rooted in Aesop and Korean and East Indian cultures, a poor woodcutter lost his ax when it fell into a river. A fantastical water sprite offered to retrieve it. Diving down, he brought up first a golden ax, then a jewel-encrusted one, and finally the woodcutter's ax. The woodcutter said the first two weren't his, but the sprite gave all three to him to reward his honesty.

Young Actors Workshop made the tale into its annual original play "The Honest Woodcutter," with a fresh new story and new songs.

Thirty-five young actors from kindergarten to age 16, from four YAW classes, set this play apart more with musical ensembles. "The Honest Woodcutter" will run at 7:30 p.m. Friday, May 12 and Saturday, May 13, and 2 p.m. Sunday, May 14 in the Half Moon Bay High School auditorium.

It's done in the YAW tradition of "guided improvisation." Experienced students first create a storyline, then younger classes round it out with more characters and subplots. Each night in performance, they recreate the storyline with improvised dialogue.

"The challenge this year is music," said YAW founder and director Auri Naggar.

There are three ensembles. The Woodcutters are a rock band with guitar, bass and drums. Another group, made up of Naggar on guitar, bassist and former YAW student Jarred Gibbs and an adult drummer from Palo Alto will accompany singers offstage. A third duo is made up of fourth-grader Eva Cassel and sixth-grader Allie Kairos.

Some of them, Naggar noted, "weren't musicians yet when we started putting the show together. A few lessons from me, and they had the natural aptitude to pick it up and play."

In this version, the Woodcutters are a struggling rock band unable to even pay their roadies. All that could change when they perform at the nightclub The River, with a record producer in the audience.

But disaster looms when their guitarist, Phoenix (Kevin McMahan-Kingshill) has a problem with his instrument, which he calls his "ax."

Phoenix is "just a different guy," McMahan-Kingshill said. "He developed over time."

Phoenix seeks help in the club. When the bouncer tosses him out, he accidentally leaves his ax there.

Then a strange man (Dan Johnston), who calls himself "the Sprite," offers to search for the guitar. He brings Phoenix a guitar of gold, which Phoenix considers keeping. An angel (Ben Cassel) and devils (Ginger Watson, Katharine Goss) bring his struggle to life.

"We try to convince him to keep the guitars, and lie and steal," said Goss.

"The theme of honesty is really nice, and forms the core of the play," said Naggar. "It's fundamental and important."

Phoenix finally returns the guitar, and has a chat with the Sprite about life, trust and honesty. The Sprite offers another guitar, even better than the first one, and again Phoenix' honesty is tested.

"I think (the audience) will like the play itself, and the message," said Ben Cassel.

"It's like the moral is, honesty is the best policy," said McCahon-Kingshill. "It's about the test he is being put through."

What he does with the test, and the suspense and twists that happen when Phoenix and his band finally take the River's stage, make for a lively surprise ending.

Enhancing the story are several original songs, among them "It's About the Music" by the Woodcutters, "Cell Phones" by the River boss' waitress daughters, "A-Bump, A-Boom" by the roadies and "Honestly, It's All About Honesty" by the Sprite.

Johnston said he wrote the words first and the tune fell into place. "The music was easy once I got the words," he said. "The play turns into a song. Almost every character has some part in some song."

The play began two years ago, said Naggar, with a suggestion from then-student Jarred Gibbs.

More than the bands make it unique this year, he added. It also follows one major theme (honesty) with one main character, instead of a more general battle between good and evil with multiple characters like previous YAW plays.

Admission to the play is \$5 at the door. For more information, YAW can be reached at 726-1304.

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AT A GLANCE

What: Young Actors Workshop original play "The Honest Woodcutter"

Where: Half Moon Bay High School auditorium

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday, May 12 and Saturday, May 13; 2 p.m. Sunday, May 14

Cost: \$5 all tickets

Information: 726-1304