

Young gods rule in theatrical Mount Olympus

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

The curtain rises on an idyllic scene on Mount Olympus. Zeus sits placidly plucking a harp, and the gods sit appreciatively around him listening to a good report on how things are going down on Earth.

But they groan upon hearing a play is about to be performed - until the new director, the yet-unknown god Eduardo, bursts through the curtain.

The actors are Young Actors Workshop students, ages 11-16, in white robes and golden sashes (except for Eduardo, who wears an ominous black sash). They are creating a play in signature YAW style of guided improvisation.

Following a storyline and characters the actors themselves developed in classes, they are improvising the lines and will create the story anew with each performance.

It's the technique that YAW founder and director Auri Naggar has used to guide students in creating original and innovative plays since the first one, "Neverland," in 1994.

"The unique thing about these plays is, because these actors are creating these plays themselves, the performance tends to feel more real, more natural. They're not following someone else's thought processes," Naggar said. "They're creating within their own hearts, their own feelings, their own minds."

This year's creation is "Oh My Gods! (or, Katharine is Going to Die)." Starting in early December, students tossed around the idea of mythology, a play-within-a-play tale of intrigue, mortality, immortality and plots among the Greek gods. The play took shape.

It's the 14th original YAW play. "Oh, my gods! I'm old," quipped Naggar. Some of the youngest "Gods" actors weren't born when "Neverland" was staged.

Still, he added, "It's wonderful that time is passing like this."

Onstage on Mount Olympus, Eduardo (whom actor Dan Johnston calls "odd, to say the least") directs "Sleeping Beauty," with the Muses as actors. Unlike the plays that preceded it, it's a hit.

But in the final scene, Sleeping Beauty, played by the goddess Katharine (Katharine Goss) pricks her finger on a spindle and dies - for real. That's unheard of for an immortal. It takes the power of Zeus (Ben Cassel) to restore her.

Eduardo's next play is "Snow White," again with leading lady Katharine doomed to die when she eats a poisoned apple. This time, it takes Zeus plus several other gods to bring her back.

The same thing happens in the third play, "Cinderella," when all the gods' combined power is needed to restore Katharine. But in the fourth play, "Bob the Builder," all their power isn't enough, and instead they all wind up dead. At that point, Eduardo reveals that he is really Hades, planning to rule them all in his underworld.

He starts by ordering music from them, and they oblige with a harp (Cassel), a saxophone (Sarah Stanton, who plays Athena), tuba (Danny Gorn, who plays Posiedon) and guitar (Eva Cassel, who plays the resourceful Artemis.) Artemis has a plot for their escape, which she hatches in the next play, the "Billy Goats Gruff."

To make a YAW play take shape, "We throw out a bunch of ideas and pick one," said Gorn.

The eldest YAW class debated fantasy, mythology and fairy tales. Then a member of a younger class proposed the Greek gods.

"It's just a bunch of ideas thrown out there and smashed together," said Johnston.

They added real-life Katharine.

"She's immortal but she dies, and there's not a reason," said Eva Cassel.

"Death (for the gods) is unheard of," said her brother Ben.

Goss said she liked the idea of dying and returning to life over and over. "I think it's fun and exciting and covers drama and suspense."

Subplots and the traits of minor gods were worked out by the younger YAW classes, which also created most of the play's original songs.

"We all think of an idea and pick one that's really, really good," said Stanton. "Then we add on and develop characters."

Ben Cassel said he had experience with comedy but went straight as Zeus. "For me, it seems the role found me, and I do the best with it I can," he said.

Playing Athena, goddess of wisdom, Stanton added something new. "She's the goddess of floofy things," with a string of tinsel on her saxophone, she said.

Eva Cassel chose a light touch for Artemis. "Mostly comedy, really girly and insanely mental," she said.

In rehearsals, they developed the plot and came up with lines. Some stick and others are re-crafted each rehearsal.

"Some ideas pretty much stay the same," Eva Cassel said. "Basically we use a lot of new words. But some other words are thrown in there, so it's different every time."

"We vary widely," said her brother Ben. "At the end, the lines are honed in to the best way we can come up with to express the ideas."

"I think of it like improvisational musicians jamming," Naggar said. "When it's good and people like it, let's keep it and try to repeat it."

Given such a loose structure, what happens if someone gives a line in an unexpected way, or can't recall how to capture the idea?

"I would ad lib and make it work somehow," said Goss. "You make it flow to where you want the storyline to go."

"What I find is, it teaches you to feel the idea of your line instead of it being all written words," said Ben Cassel. "The words aren't as (important) as the idea you're getting across."

Key to both improvisation and memorization is knowing that the show goes on.

"In some cases, words are important, like in a Shakespeare play," Ben Cassel continued. But still, "If you mistake a 'thee' for a 'thou,' it's not a big deal because you can go with it. If you use the wrong word, you make it seem like the right word."

Through the process, the kids learn more than improvisation.

"It teaches you to think when you're under pressure," said Gorn. "When you forget a line, you think quickly."

"You're not as shy about talking," said Stanton. "If you're quiet and in the corner, you have to invent lines and say them in front of the class. You get used to it."

"Oh My Gods" will run at 7:30 p.m. Friday, May 11, and Saturday, May 12, and 2 p.m. Sunday, May 13, in the Half Moon Bay High School auditorium. Admission is \$5 at the door.

For information, call YAW at 726-1304.