

Young actors become mad-scientist stage geniuses

By Stacy Trevenon [stacy@hmbreview.com]

Young Actors Workshop's 2008 original production, "Dr. Awesome and the Mushroom People," which opens Friday night, is based on a theme that no matter what others may think, it's important to be who you are.

This play, like its predecessors over 15 years, is a YAW original production. This work of science fiction with a message, which will run Friday and Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoon on the Half Moon Bay High School stage, was created through what YAW founder Auri Naggar calls "guided improvisation" that invites students to delve into their creative, storytelling and songwriting talents.

The result is a major storyline and principal characters created by an experienced class, supplemental stories and characters created by younger classes and songs created by all. The play follows those storylines but is improvised, and so is different each show.

"Some of the brilliant things kids can do when they're improvising, are lost forever," said Naggar. "But we would work with (those ideas) and save them."

That concept originated with Naggar's musical background and his favorite way of creating songs in jam sessions. "When we came up with something we liked, we kept it," he said.

He took that idea to his students. "I saw how the creativity in kids occurred, and we could apply the same principles," he said.

In a process which began in December, "Dr. Awesome" started with the idea of mad scientists, from which the students brainstormed the idea of "a perfectly legitimate mainstream religion" based on bologna, said actor Dan Johnston (Dr. Awesome.)

"We started with the mushroom people and came up with the scientist idea," said Dylan Gallup, who plays the scientist "Dr. Hayr."

The idea of "baloneyism" came out of a running gag of a character who is hypnotized and falls down when he hears the word "baloney."

"We needed something that people would think of (as) being crazy," said Johnston.

The other YAW classes made up their own stories, as well as seven original songs, to go with that. Four YAW classes, of 35 students that include first-timers and nine-year YAW veteran Ben Cassel, will perform it this weekend.

"It's probably the most strange play we've had in a long time," said Cassel.

The students like improvisation and the creativity that goes with it.

In a conventional play where actors render a memorized script, "You're stuck with a certain role," said Cassel, who plays the scientist "Steve." "Here, you create your character. It's freer."

"We add a bunch of our own stuff," said Kevin McCurdy, who plays "Dr. Maybe."

The format is flexible, said Gallup. "It's really fun because you have the guidelines of the story, but if you alter it slightly, you have the same gist."

Helping the sci-fi fun were props like a plastic brain, wigs and thick-rimmed glasses from the House of Humor in Redwood City. The students came up with their own special effects like accents, Dr. Awesome's high-pitched cackle and Dr. Geeter's (Eva Cassel) giggle.

"I think the creativity in these plays is absolutely astounding," said Eva Cassel. "The little kids have so much creativity. So many ideas are put into what this play is."

The play "is like a rug," said her brother Ben. "All the different people and personalities, all woven together."

Tickets are \$5 at the door for “Dr. Awesome.” For information, call YAW at 726-1304.