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## Youth Theater Camp Prepares Full Musical Within Three Weeks

By Clare Varellas



Members of the cast block a dance scene.  
Photos Clare Varellas

it really quickly."

Teaching such value of hard work was one of the focuses of co-owners Rena Wilson and Renee DeWeese when the pair started the academy three and a half years ago, in addition, of course, to fostering fun and an appreciation for the arts. Wilson, an actress for Beach Blanket Babylon, and DeWeese, a longtime performer for various Bay Area theater companies, met at an audition for Diablo Theatre Company's "Peter Pan" in 2007, and decided to start the academy after teaching theater to youth for separate companies.

"One day we were just like, 'Why are we doing this for other people? We should go into business together,' so we did just that," said DeWeese. "We both have strengths in very different places, but together, combined, we sort of hit everything."

By "everything," DeWeese is referring to a combination of acting, singing, and dancing, all of which are plentiful in "Thoroughly Modern Millie, Jr."

The camp, one of several that the academy holds during the summer in addition to its year-round lessons and school enrichment programs, featured eight days of theater workshops to develop campers' skills after the first two days were spent on auditions, callbacks, and casting. Beginning the third day of the camp, which started on July 13, campers spent the mornings in workshops honing their stage skills, and the afternoons preparing the show.

Now, only hours from opening night on July 31, they spend the entire day preparing the show, for which everyone is very excited.

"I'm always excited about the nervous part, where right before the show I feel so nervous, and then right when I get out on stage, it's an amazing feeling," said Mackenzie Bunzel-Hardie, 12, who plays lead role Millie in the show. "It's so fun."

Bunzel-Hardie, as Millie, will depict a country girl who moves to the big city to find love and wealth, but who learns about friendship and what's really valuable in life in the process. This version of the show, shortened and made family-friendly by Musical Theatre International, is shorter and more age-appropriate than its 2001 Broadway counterpart, but just as packed with booming

Enter the studio of Lamorinda Theatre Academy near La Fiesta Square in Lafayette any day this week between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m., and you'll be greeted with the sights and sounds of the 1920s, or at least the stage version.

As the participants of Lamorinda Theatre Academy's summer camp hurriedly prepare a production of Jazz Age-set musical "Thoroughly Modern Millie, Jr." within the three-week span of the camp session, 19 girls and one boy between the ages of 10 and 13 spend their days running Broadway songs, trying on vintage costumes, scribbling blocking in scripts, and prancing the Charleston in tap shoes.

"It's kind of intense, and it's not as long as anyone would hope to have, but it's a fun experience because then you kind of know what show business is like," said camper Nora Schultz, 12, a member of the ensemble. "You have to know

1920s culture.

"Even though it's current, it has the feel of an old classic musical, so we also like that," said DeWeese. "The kids get to learn dances from the Roaring 20s and that style of old, classic Broadway is in the music."

The style is also in the costumes, sourced from the academy's collection, other theater companies, or made especially for the show. Sometimes campers pick up life skills just learning how to fasten a double-breasted jacket or slip on a dress, Wilson and DeWeese say.

It's all in preparation for the show, which will be held at Campolindo Performing Arts Center at 7 p.m. on July 31 and 2 p.m. on Aug. 1, open to the public. In the meantime, campers continue working hard and going home exhausted, but also happy.

"I think they also go home excited, which is our most important thing," said Wilson. "We want kids to go home excited about the performing arts, and whether a kid ends up pursuing this as a job or whether they just become a lifelong theater patron, our goal is to expose the kids to the arts, so that they know what it's all about, and they can appreciate it for the rest of their lives."



Some of the show's colorful, 1920s-era costumes

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