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'Ugly Ducklings' debuts tonight

By COLIN HICKEY
Staff Writer

WATERVILLE -- Harassment, gay bashing, teenage suicide -- not the material you typical would associate with youth theater. But "Ugly Ducklings" is not your typical production.

The play, which makes it debut at 7:30 tonight at Colby College's Strider Theater, features an all-female cast with actors as young as 10 and most between 12 and 16.

Lauren Sterling, a member of the creative team behind the play, said great attention was given to making sure the young actors and their parents understood the sensitivity of the issues raised by "Ugly Ducklings."

The objective was to assemble a cast comfortable with the material, Sterling said.

The reality has gone one step farther. The 14 young people who take the stage tonight have absorbed themselves in the production and the issues it explores.

In the process they have learned more about themselves and more about the values, prejudices and dynamics of western society.

"What I think has been so inspiring and amazing about this process, which we have really been evaluating as we go along, is the relationships that have developed, and the trust that has developed, between and among the cast members, as well as their relationships with their parents around these issues," Sterling said.

In the more than three months the play has been in production, "Ugly Ducklings" has had only three cast members drop out, and all three did so in the opening weeks.

Sterling said one left because of transportation problems, while parents of two others pulled their children out for unspecified reasons.

For at least four members of the cast, Sterling said, the issues of harassment and gay bashing is familiar territory. Two are bisexual and two are lesbians, Sterling said.

Sterling said the play production team did not conduct auditions with a goal of choosing gay actresses.

"We had no idea in the audition process that we would actually cast and find the perfect actresses who had actually lived this in real life," she said.

This injection of real life in the theater production, Sterling said, has helped raise the level of understanding for everybody involved in "Ugly Ducklings."

"From these young people we have learned the most," Sterling said, "and the other cast members have learned the most."

Sterling, the volunteer coordinator of Greater Waterville Communities for Children & Youth, teamed with Karen Heck and Lyn Mikel Brown of Hardy Girls/Hardy Women, the Waterville nonprofit dedicated to empowering girls, to make "Ugly Ducklings" possible.

Their hope is that the play will increase awareness of the prejudice and ignorance that leads to homophobia, gay bashing and teenage suicide.

In pursuit of this objective, a film crew is shooting a documentary of the "Ugly Ducklings" production that will be part of a community education kit that will be distributed nationally to schools, communities and families.

"Ugly Ducklings" plays at Colby through Saturday. Evening shows are at 7:30. A 2 p.m. matinee is scheduled Saturday. Admission is \$10, \$2 for teenagers.

A Sept. 23 performance at Camden Opera House in Camden also is planned.

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