

Maine Sunday Telegram

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Bob Keyes

From 'Ugly Ducklings,' a powerful message of hope, decency

By BOB KEYES, Portland Press Herald Writer

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Some theater is pure entertainment. Other theater changes lives.

With "Ugly Ducklings," producers hope to save lives.

An organization for girls in Waterville is producing the play, which is about homophobia at a summer camp for girls. Written by Maine playwright Carolyn Gage, "Ugly Ducklings" deals head-on with the issue of child and teen suicide related to gay and lesbian harassment.

Hardy Girls Healthy Women and Greater Waterville's Communities for Children and Youth will present the play beginning Thursday at Colby College and again Sept. 23 at Camden Opera House.

Because of its content, "Ugly Ducklings" is an explosive play - and not an easy one to stage in the current political environment, said Lauren Sterling, the play's executive producer and advocate for children and youth in Maine.

"But it's important that we do it because there are young people in our communities who are feeling the need to self-medicate, to think about taking their lives and in fact are taking their lives because they don't feel emotionally safe and honored for being who they are, in terms of their relationship between their sexual orientation and the bigger world around them," said Sterling.

Cathy Plourde, the play's director, said her cast includes children between the ages of 9 and 17, who live in communities from Kennebunk to Unity. There's one adult in the cast.

"I think the impact is going to be amazing," said Plourde. "That play is radical. It was unproduceable 10 to 15 years ago. We are talking about sexuality, and not heterosexuality, and children. It's going to get attention."

UGLY DUCKLINGS

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 15, Friday, Sept. 16, and Saturday, Sept. 17; 2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 17.

WHERE: Strider Theater, Colby College, Waterville.

TICKETS: \$10 general public, \$2 students.

INFO: 861-8131 or www.hardygirlshealthywomen.org.

ADDITIONAL PERFORMANCE: 7:30 p.m. Sept. 23, Camden Opera House. Tickets for the Camden show cost \$15 for the general public, \$7 for students.

PRODUCER'S NOTE: "Ugly Ducklings" is not recommended for children younger than 11, because of mature content and language.

The American Theater Critics Association nominated "Ugly Ducklings" as the best new play produced outside New York. It won the National Lesbian Theatre Aware of 2004 from Curve Magazine.

The Waterville production will mark the play's Maine debut.

The play is part of a campaign by Hardy Girls Healthy Women to end bias-based bullying and harassment of gay and lesbian youth, said Lyn Mikel Brown, a professor of education and women's, gender and sexuality studies at Colby College and co-creator of Hardy Girls Healthy Women.

She has researched and written extensively on the development of girls. Her most recent book is "Girlfighting: Betrayal and Rejection Among Girls."

She was attracted to the play because it addressed issues that she has been talking about for years, particularly the influence of older girls on younger girls and the manner in which girls put each other down in an attempt to maintain their image and lessen their anxieties.

She admits to being nervous about staging the play in Maine. With a campaign under way to repeal Maine's gay rights law, she's uncertain of the public's reaction.

But, she noted, there was not a single voice of protest when the audition notice went out in June seeking actresses "of color, varying body types, and varying sexual orientation and gender identity expression."

The campaign also will include a documentary film about the staging of the play, directed by Academy Award-winning director Fawn Yacker. The documentary will be distributed nationally, along with community action kits, to raise awareness of youth issues and reduce youth suicide, Sterling said.

She said Gage's play is an ideal vehicle for the message.

"The piece of art is stunning. Through their voices, these kids and young women are telling the story from their perspective, from a young perspective, about what it feels like and looks like to deal with this kind of oppression and silencing of kids," she said.

"It's brilliantly written. It really asks the audience to look at themselves, about how they communicate with young children about this issue. It's hard to do sometimes, especially with this issue. But it's a beautiful, beautiful piece of theater that has a chance to save people's lives."

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