



Swift Creek musical theater students learn new choreography from Kathryn Long. PHOTO BY AMANDA THOMPSON ILLUSTRATION FROM GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTO

MUSICAL THEATER THRILLS SWIFT CREEK MIDDLE-SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Middle school can be tough. It's an awkward, in-between, time when the world seems topsy-turvy and things don't always work out as you hope.

But for many adolescents, there's a thrilling anticipation for what the future may hold, how to get there, and who they will become along the way. This is not unlike the characters' journey in "Into the Woods," the musical by Sondheim and Lapine. Appropriately enough, the musical theater students at Swift Creek Middle School are in rehearsals for that show.

Several well-known fairy tales are interwoven through the plot but in lieu of a concise, happily ever after conclusion, the show illuminates the more ambiguous reality of life. Among other things, the musical teaches that our

actions have consequences and that by working together, we can overcome challenges.

It's this feeling of collaboration that drew eighth-grader Joelle Campana to the musical theater class. "You're in there with your friends and they're all supportive," she said. "We're learning how to work together, doing lines, and singing together."

Joelle has several performance credits but finds this production to be especially meaningful. "My parents did 'Into the Woods' like 20 years ago." Coincidentally, Joelle is playing the baker's wife, the role held by her mother in that earlier production.

Eighth-grader Riordan Pollock also has community theater experience and agrees that teamwork and perseverance are essential. "When we're working together, we create something really cool with every single dance move

and every note we're trying to hit. It may be frustrating at times but that doesn't mean that we should stop trying."

Riordan believes this process encourages personal exploration and growth. "It is helping everyone develop their own character, in a way. They're learning more about themselves. You have to study what motivates your character and when you do that, you can discover a new passion in yourself."

As a seventh-grader, this was Tedeja Buckles' first opportunity to take the musical theater class and she has made some surprising self-discoveries. "I learned that I'm actually a better singer than I thought." When describing her first solo performance, she said, "it was pretty hard to hit all the right notes and get on the right timing, but I actually did it. It makes me say, 'OK, I know I can do this, what more can I do?' I keep going because I find something new about myself every time."

Musical theater is a relatively new and popular course offering at Swift Creek. Co-taught by Jenilee Hallam and

Kathryn Long, the class has doubled in size since last year. Hallam also leads three girls choruses and a boys chorus and she's enjoying the opportunity to combine her skills with Long's for the benefit of the students.

"They learn self-regulation, how to rehearse, how to be in a group where you have to be silent for a long period." Though Hallam admits it can be difficult for some students, "just because they're middle schoolers doesn't mean they can't do it."

Many of the musical theater students are also enrolled in other performing arts courses at Swift Creek. "This is what they really enjoy," Hallam said. "It's going to affect how they interact with other humans. With as many issues as we have going on today, you never know what it could do. It's a really special thing and I'm thankful that we get to do it."

Long shares this sentiment and feels that by co-teaching with Hallam, students "get the best of both worlds." In addition to the musical theater class,

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Long teaches dance and theater during the school day. She explained that students get Hallam's "expertise with the music and then I can focus on directing and choreographing. It runs almost like a little theater school."

That's something Long knows quite a bit about as her degree in music theater performance came from the American Music and Dramatic Academy in the New School University in New York. She is a seasoned performer and it all started right here in Tallahassee, her hometown. "Middle school is actually when I realized that theater was what I wanted to do in my life. It's really a personal thing to be able to see that happen for some of these kids. I love to be there in those moments," she said.

Reflecting on the significance of the musical theater class and what it can inspire in students, Long said "it's about expressing what's inside of you without judging it. To gift it to the world



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Swift Creek students rehearse a scene from "Into the Woods."



regardless of what anyone thinks about it or what you think about it. That's our job as artists. To realize that we do all of these expressive things because we love doing it, because it's inside of us, and because we want to communicate our part of the human condition with others in this way. That's been my journey in the arts and that's where I want my student to get as well."

Swift Creek's Into the Woods production will be presented on April 6 and 7. Doors open at 6 p.m. and the show begins at 6:30 p.m. Tickets are \$5 for adults, \$2 for stu-

dents and can be purchased at the door. For priority seating information, contact the school or email Jenilee Hallam at hallamj@leonschools.net.

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