

'Music Man' tickles the fancy of Maclay students

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COUNCIL ON CULTURE & ARTS

One of America's most beloved musicals, "The Music Man" by Meredith Willson, takes place in Iowa in 1912, not a location or an era you'd expect for local elementary school students to readily identify with.

However, with expert guidance from Maclay School's Cindy Thomas, emerging actors in second through fifth grades have learned to stretch their theatrical muscles and inhabit characters from a century ago. "We talk about the time period and the language in this show. Some of the lines are so cute, 'geeze petes' and 'oh, swell.' That's a bad word," said Thomas.

The students were entirely unfamiliar with the musical which, in many ways, was an advantage. "They had no idea so they didn't have any pre-conceived notions. It inspired their imagination. They're a big part of how they want to present their characters and how they want to dress. I let them make those creative choices."

Thomas nurtures a lot of creative choices as the lower school and upper school drama teacher. She extends herself even further by sponsoring Company, the upper school's thespian troupe and serves as the co-chair of the Fine Arts department. In many ways it's not surprising that Thomas is so devoted to her work at Maclay. She's an alumna and, with an extensive background in theater, she can relate to her elementary students' burgeoning love of the art form.

"It started when I was about their age. I grew up at Young Actors Theater and I went to New York and saw 'Annie' for the first time. I fell in love with it. It was a moment in my life where it clicked." She went on to study theater in Philadelphia and at FSU, later taking to the stage in New York and doing television in Los Angeles. She came back to Tallahassee and began teaching at Maclay in 1997.

"We're so lucky at Maclay that every lower school student has drama as part of their curriculum and students in the second through fifth grades get to participate in an annual musical," said Thomas. Another unique aspect of the drama program is that "each class puts on their own performance instead of it being the whole lower school. It gives more children an opportunity to play a part." That means Thomas is working with 12 different



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Michael Boulos from Lori Angerer's class played Harold Hill.



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Cindy Thomas runs a dress rehearsal for one of her second-grade casts.

casts which allows her more time with each individual to celebrate small victories.

"I love it when you see that child, all of a sudden, make that connect and a little light goes on," Thomas said. "They just shine. Just to see their passion come out and how creative they are. The things they say crack me up, everyday. I love that they don't have any inhibitions and they're up for whatever. They seem to be having a great time with it."

Fourth-grader Jamie Maloy is a perfect example. He played Professor Harold Hill and said "I think it's fun to be the lead role because you have all the attention on you. I love being the center of attention, I can't lie." He enjoys the creative process and shared "it's fun to get to know your character and to express how that character feels and acts." A veteran performer with a spirited temperament, Jamie said, "I'm a very hyper person, so I get to

channel my energy through acting, through my lines, through dancing, too. It just helps me a lot to act."

In the role of Marian Paroo, fifth-grader Amelia Haggins also sees value in her theater experience. "You have to memorize a lot and it really teaches you how to be responsible. It teaches you how to talk in front of people, make eye contact, how to project, and do a lot of things." She appreciates the way Thomas structures the productions and said "nobody's left out, everybody has a part and everybody gets a line. Everybody has something that they need to do and everybody's role is really important."

As a second-grader, this is Campbell Ruff's first time on Maclay's stage, but he's no stranger to the limelight. As a student at Young Actors Theater, he has performed before and because of his experience, he said, "I never get nervous. I feel awesome and

excited." Campbell played Mayor Shinn and said "I really like having lines and stuff. I also like the dances. My favorite dance is the Shipooipi."

The students' enthusiasm is matched by that of Thomas and those who have helped bring the production to life, including Maclay's lower school music teacher, Kristen Hughes and local sound technician, JB Ritter. Maclay's visual art teachers also provide assistance, making the annual musical truly cross-curricular. "We're doing it in a way that brings the arts together in one big production," said Thomas.

This kind of teamwork is echoed by the students who learn dramatic technique and much more. "They practice life skills like cooperating, listening, timing, focus, putting themselves out there. For some of them, it maybe conquers some fears, it brings out things in them that they didn't know they had. I want to provide them with that opportunity they might not seek out by themselves."

Amanda Karioth Thompson is the Assistant Director for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).