



DANCING THEIR WAY TO DEBUT AT EDINBURGH FRINGE FESTIVAL.

Pictures by Ivy Ashe



VIVIAN EWING IS IN ELITE HIGH SCHOOL TROUPE.



STAR FORCES: TAYLOR McNEELY AND GRANT MEACHAM.

Scotland-Bound Secret to Be Revealed

By IVY ASHE

It's been nearly 400 years since Jaques in *As You Like It* made the observation that all the world's a stage, but over the next few weeks, high school drama teacher Kate Murray and 16 theatre students will take the Shakespearian saying to heart as they rehearse their original musical, *The Secret of the Seven Sisters*, in parking lots, hallways and on beaches in order to prepare for their upcoming two-week trip to Festival Fringe in Edinburgh, Scotland, where they will stage four performances of the show.

And this Sunday they will take the real stage at the high school Performing Arts Center to offer the Vineyard community a preview performance of the show which has been in the works since last May. That is when the theatre program first received a nomination to be one of just 43 American high school groups attending the prestigious drama festival. After being nominated

by Emerson College theatre professor Robert Colby, who based his selection on the group's performance at the annual Massachusetts High School Drama Guild Festival, Ms. Murray and the students created a portfolio of their recent works — featuring original productions *Boxes*, *Between the Lines and Letters* — which proved strong enough to land them the spot at Fringe.

"I can't believe it — a whole year . . . over a year — and it's finally here," said Tessa Permar during a music rehearsal Tuesday afternoon. Ms. Permar plays heroine Maia, a young girl on a "journey to find her rightful place in the galaxy," in the words of castmate Bryan MacKenty. Along the way, she meets characters both helpful (such as guide Kavi, played by rising senior Grant Meacham), and hindering (Quetalcoatl, played by rising sophomore Taylor McNeely) before finally reuniting with her six sisters.

To say more about the sisters would, of course, ruin the secret implied by the musical's title.

The journey from the humble initial playwriting session in June 2009 ("We ate a cake and brainstormed," recalled actor Charlie Picor) to last Saturday's four-hour-long tech rehearsal rivals that of Maia herself. The script, written by Ms. Murray with input from workshops with the troupe, has changed and cast members have come and gone, lost to the worlds of college orientations and full-time jobs. Mr. MacKenty, for example, took over the dual roles of Orion and ancient god Poseidon (in addition to minor chorus roles) just two months ago, and has since thrown himself into a rehearsal schedule even more demanding than that required of those who have been on board since the beginning, often spending over six hours a day at the performing arts center.

"He's been a seriously wonderful addition," said Ms. Murray.

Mr. MacKenty had no trouble finding a place among the established cast, noting that "a lot of us have known each other since kindergarten." Mr. Meacham, who, along with Ms. Permar is a choreographer for the production, added that the drama department is "the closest in this whole place" (while the cast members are all part of the high school theatre program, the actual *Seven Sisters* musical is sponsored by local theatre fund-raising group BravEncore). Inside jokes fly back and forth between cast members backstage during rehearsals. "Where is my super-suit?" cries Mr. Meacham, referencing Pixar's *The Incredibles* as he and backstage guru, rising senior Mike Patnaude, laugh about the shiny gold one-piece costume Kavi wears throughout the play. Spontaneous dance breakouts are common.

The actual staged dance numbers accompany music composed by Ms. Murray and drama alum Jake Estabrook (high school class of 2007), who also arranged the songs and works as a vocal coach. The Murray-Estabrook partnership dates back to Ms. Murray's first year of teaching at the high school seven years ago, when Mr. Estabrook was a student in her class.

"It's a really great team," she said. "To work with him [now] as a professional



TESSA PERMAR SEEKS TO FIND HER PLACE IN THE GALAXY.

and teacher has been such a joy."

Also integral to the *Seven Sisters* team is the group of parents who have provided a backbone of support for the past year. They were largely responsible for spearheading fund-raising campaigns to cover the \$6,000-per-actor travel costs, in addition to the \$5,000 needed for costumes and props. While the production is still just shy of its ambitious goal — raffle tickets for an October Patriots-Vikings matchup are still being sold by the cast — Ms. Murray is nonetheless "blown away by the amount of work

space where they will perform until the day before curtain, although they do know that, at 20 feet wide and just 13 and a half feet deep, it is less than half the size of the cavernous performing arts center stage. Adding to the complications, Mr. Patnaude, who has the already daunting task of operating both the light and sound boards while serving as stage manager, must run his technical checks in just an hour and a half. Such limitations are the main impetus for Ms. Murray to stage upcoming rehearsals anywhere and everywhere possible.

"That's the nature of the game," she said, excited by the opportunity to expose the students to the real-life whims of theatre. "Live performance is not predictable."

It seems a sure bet, though, that *The Secret of the Seven Sisters* will be a smash hit both on-Island and across the pond.

A one-time-only preview performance of the original musical The Secret of the Seven Sisters will be held Sunday, August 1 at 4 p.m. at the regional high school Performing Arts Center. Tickets are \$10 for general admission and \$7 for students and seniors.