

VINEYARD GAZETTE

Archived Edition: Friday, May 29, 2009

Young Actors to Hit Global Stage

By LIZ WEISS

When an actor is nominated for an Oscar, the studio handles the marketing, with expensive lobbying campaigns planned over months.

When Kate Murray and her drama department at the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School found out they'd been nominated for a comparable reward — a spot representing American student theatre at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival — they had one day to turn around their own campaign.

The prize would be awarded by the American High School Theatre Festival, which was formed 15 years ago to showcase the nation's drama students internationally. Each year, in conjunction with the world renowned Fringe, it takes schools to Scotland for this mega-festival of the arts. Theatre professors and organizations nationwide nominate top high school programs; then, according to the AHSTF Web site, "Each nominated school receives an application, and all completed applications are reviewed by . . . a panel of college theatre professionals . . . based on their most recent bodies of work, awards, community involvement, philosophies and recommendations."

Ms. Murray had no time to mull the importance of the heavy duty application, as she was busy simply making the deadline.

"I was called literally the day before the materials were due. I did not know we



High school drama students will represent the nation at Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

were nominated,” she said this week, elated at being chosen to perform at the 2010 Fringe. “I had students help me make a portfolio and I used their suggestions. I felt very rushed, but we were thrilled someone from Emerson had nominated us.”

The Vineyarders were nominated by Emerson College graduate theatre education director Robert Colby. “I take the smallest amount of credit for the nomination,” he told the Gazette. “It’s truly about the strength of the program and the materials they have put together themselves.

“My bias was to look for programs that are original to add to the energy of the festival and show off what American high school students can do,” he said, adding, “I wanted to let their voices be heard.

“It is a challenge to do original work, and clearly in the past few years a wide variety of people have thought the troupe has excelled,” he said.

For two years, Ms. Murray and her students have shown extraordinary ambition in writing and performing original stage pieces for statewide competition. First came their original play Boxes, a post-9/11 drama, which went to the Massachusetts Drama Guild finals in 2007. Then Between the Lines, their comedy of manners, went to the 2008 competition. This year, the troupe made the statewide semifinals with yet another complex original play, Letters, written by Ms. Murray and students Kirkland Beck and Kenny Stone.

Senior Daniel Cuff said, “It’s amazing our little high school has been nominated to represent the country.”

Ms. Murray plans another original piece for the Fringe, “that is not based on one thing, but rather based on everything the program does. I want the students to be a part of it ... [something that] demonstrates the skills, talents and personalities of the ensemble. We’ve all had commitment to raising the bar.”

This kind of original ensemble work depends on skills and creative reach in many areas — and it was a risky strategy for Ms. Murray, who a few years ago took over a program that had become widely loved and respected under former drama teacher Duncan Ross. Murray admitted it was no easy task. “I worked very hard — [and] everyone has really supported me,” she said. “I realized we needed to come back with something really unique and really different. We needed come back with a signature.”

As Ms. Murray sees it, “I was really lucky. This year my students were really invested in the writing process and the ensemble process. We believe in everything we are doing and we are trying to make it better throughout the process.

“They [the students] have had a well-rounded theatre study experience. The students are encouraged to learn all parts of theatre and understand why each piece is important. They . . . want to create new art.”

Now, their selection for the Fringe festival is further validation of their hard work. “It is an incredible honor,” Ms. Murray said.

Soon after Ms. Murray took over, her position and the drama program were threatened by cutbacks in the school budget. From that developed BravEncore, a community fundraising group.

Ms. Murray added, “Steve Nixon, our principal, understands the value and importance of the arts. And the community at large’s support has been proven by the challenges economically and the incredible commitment they have shown. We need to keep that alive.”

Mr. Cuff called the department a home away from home for alumni, on whose success this festival opportunity partly rests.

Ms. Estabrook agreed. “Being nominated is based on performances before you. Past students are truly tied to present students in the drama department.”

Students past and present will perform at a fundraiser this weekend, to help reach the \$6,000 goal the department needs to take up the festival invitation.

Mr. Cuff said, “Only the junior class is actually going, but we could help, which would be awesome.”

Mr. Pikor said, “They are so psyched and so lucky. They get to represent our Island as a whole. I think this is going to bring a lot more attention to the drama department.”

Miss Clarke said, “It will express how much we need the arts.”

Will it set a new standard for the drama department? Mr. Pikor: “Definitely. It’s become international.”

BravEncore hosts an Evening of Edibles and Entertainment on May 30 at 6 p.m. at The Yard on Middle Road in Chilmark: cocktail hour, dinner and dessert, a silent auction, a performance of their award-winning play Letters and a Tableside Talent Menu, where you may order a monologue, sonnet, sword fight or instrumental for \$5.

Standup comedienne and MVRHS alumni Alison Carr will perform, as will Berklee musician Lydia Fischer.

The price is \$25 for adults; \$15 for students and seniors. Tickets available online at mvtickets.com. For details, call 508-693-1033, extension 250, or e-mail bravencore@gmail.com.

© 2009 Vineyard Gazette