

'Some Have Greatness'

SPARC offers youth an outlet for creativity, expression through theater

BY GRACE MATSON

Livermore-based Shakespeare & Performing Arts Regional Company (SPARC) provides kids in the Tri-Valley an opportunity to explore and perform live theater through its youth-centered programming, like the "Some Have Greatness" after school program.

SPARC, formerly known as Livermore Shakespeare Festival, started the "Some Have Greatness" program about five years ago as a theater summer camp, according to SPARC's education director Lindsey Schmeltzer.

"Students would attend a two-week camp that focused on whatever Shakespeare play SPARC Theater — then known as Livermore Shakespeare Festival — produced that summer," Schmeltzer said, adding that the program was created to provide students a place to explore their creativity while working in a collaborative environment with other students their age.

Though the program has grown over the years, students are not required to audition

or have any acting experience to participate in the program. This is intended to give anyone interested in expressing themselves through theater a chance to participate, according to Schmeltzer.

"The students have really blossomed in this creative environment. They were given a space to explore and build a solid ensemble while working together to put on a play," Schmeltzer said of the program's impact on participants.

During the height of the pandemic, the summer camp was moved online, and Schmeltzer said it was clear that the students were missing the social connections that theater classes offer.

"One of the most common concerns we heard from our students was that after a year or more of online learning they were worried they had forgotten how to make friends but had more confidence in their social skills after participating in the program," she said.

While the classes have since returned to in-person, the safety protocols and



COURTESY SPARC

"Some Have Greatness" program participants rehearse "A Midsummer Musical" in 2021.

guidelines that SPARC follows continue to pose some challenges for the students and audiences.

"All students and audience members answer a COVID questionnaire and have a temperature check before they enter the studio space and everyone wears masks throughout the class or performances," Schmeltzer said. "Having all the student actors wear masks during the performance has proven a challenge because it makes them harder to hear and the audience is less able to read their

facial expressions," she added.

Despite the difficulties created by wearing masks, Schmeltzer said there is a positive outcome from the experience. "The silver lining has been that this gives students the opportunity to work on public speaking skills such as projection and diction, and encourages them to be very specific with their character's body language to ensure they are telling a clear story," she said.

Because of the pandemic, SPARC has also had to limit the number of family and

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friends each student is allowed to invite to the live performances at the end of each session. However, Schmeltzer said they record each performance and provide the link for students to share with more loved ones.

SPARC is currently hosting "Some Have Greatness" classes for elementary students in third through fifth grade and for middle schoolers in sixth through eighth grade.

The productions for the spring cohorts are "The Emperor's New Clothes" for the younger group and a condensed version of the classic comedy "As You Like It" for

the older students.

Rehearsals for the shows are currently underway and performances are set to take place in May for students' family and friends.

Some of SPARC's other youth programs include the "So Wise So Young Online" Shakespeare literacy program for children in second through fourth grade, "Livermore Shakes Educates" in-school educational programs led by professional teaching artists and internship and apprenticeship opportunities.

More information is available at sparctheater.org. ■

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