

Renee O'Connor swaps 'Xena' for Shakespeare



Renee O'Connor plays Juliet's nurse during rehearsals for the Southern Shakespeare Company's upcoming production of "Romeo & Juliet." HALI TAUXE/DEMOCRAT

She's in town for 'Romeo & Juliet,' co-starring her son

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Renee O'Connor, known to millions as Gabrielle from "Xena: Warrior Princess," is the guest artist for Southern Shakespeare Festival's upcoming "Romeo and Juliet." She's playing Juliet's nurse, a bawdy, appealing character who speaks more lines than anyone else in the play — apart from the lovers themselves.

She's been in Tallahassee since mid-April rehearsing, but you might not recognize her at first without her skimpy costumes and fighting staff.

Here are 7 things you need to know — or that are just pretty cool — about the Battling Bard of Potidaea's brush with The Bard.

1. O'Connor's 16-year-old son, Miles Muir, is playing Romeo. He's done community theater, but this will be his first professional role.

"I just was really lucky," said Muir. "My mom had been set to play the nurse for about six months, and we talked about me sending in a tape, and maybe I'd get a small part in the show. I was so lucky because (the producers) had



Michael Nichols, left, and Miles Muir practice their swordplay during rehearsals. Muir, 16, who is playing Romeo, is O'Connor's son. HALI TAUXE/DEMOCRAT

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fallen in love with Melanie (Applegate, who plays Juliet) and everyone else auditioning for Romeo was much older.”

Applegate is just 15, and a Tallahassee local.

It's rare for a company to find teenage actors mature enough to pull off these iconic roles. The characters are 13 and 14 but are usually played by people in their 20s trying to look younger. O'Connor herself was 23 when she started playing the 16-year-old Gabrielle.

Laura Johnson, executive director of Southern Shakespeare, said luck had nothing to do with Muir's casting.

“Self-taped auditions were coming in from all over the country, and Renee was submitting lots of them from actors she'd worked with,” she said. “We didn't even realize the (family) connection, because we had so many videos.”

Director Michael Richey was wowed by Muir's audition.

“When I saw that, I started reading the paperwork that came with the video,” said Johnson. “We had seen in the video that Miles was wearing braces, but the accompanying note from Renee said, ‘The braces are coming off in about a month and I can tell you that for sure because I'm his mom.’”

Applegate was equally excited.

“I heard there was a 16-year-old and I was praying he would be good,” she said. “If they picked a college guy, they wouldn't have picked me.”

2. “Xena” fans are coming to Tallahassee from all over for the chance to see O'Connor perform live.

“I've gotten emails from fans from Alabama to Los Angeles,” said Johnson. “Someone is even coming from Australia.”

Will they see any of their beloved Gabrielle in the Nurse? O'Connor thinks so.

“They will definitely see the sense of who I am come across,” she said. “And in the relationship between the Nurse and Juliet, you can see some similarity to the original relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. It's a special relationship, very playful.”

3. Muir hasn't watched a lot of “Xena.”

“People think it's a crime against humanity that I haven't seen them,” he said, and laughed. “I saw a few when I was really young and I watched a few recently. It's so funny watching Mom — kind, gentle, wise Mom — and she's this young spunky little thing booming out stuff like, ‘You can't be the Amazon



Renee O'Connor, right, and her son Miles Muir share the stage during rehearsals for the Southern Shakespeare Company's upcoming production of “Romeo & Juliet.” HALI TAUXE/DEMOCRAT

queen until you beat me!”

“I think it's hilarious. And the costumes! She never wears stuff like that at all, so I see the show, and she's bouncing around, and I'm like, hello?”

Bad news for fans hoping for a reprise of the mini-skirt and crop top: The Nurse's costume covers O'Connor from head to toe. But devotees will still recognize that impish gleam in her eyes.

4. The stage combat is going to be awesome. Southern Shakespeare brought in a professional fight choreographer from New York, Jason Tate, to train the actors.

The fight scenes aren't exactly fake — the audience will hear the metal clanging against metal, and get to see some intense swordplay.

“It's controlled fighting,” said Muir. “Jason's style of stage combat is more modern. In traditional stage fighting, you always aim the blade away from the other actors. But we have enough space at Cascades Park that we can thrust to center body mass and use actual movement to tell the story.”

5. Mother and son are both musical theater nerds. O'Connor tries to keep it under the radar, but she loves doing community theater, especially with her family. Recently the whole gang — her

husband, both kids and the family dog, Barry — performed in a production of “Mary Poppins.”

“Theater has always been my passion, ever since I was a child, and will always be,” she said. “The writing just has more depth to it than many opportunities in TV and film.”

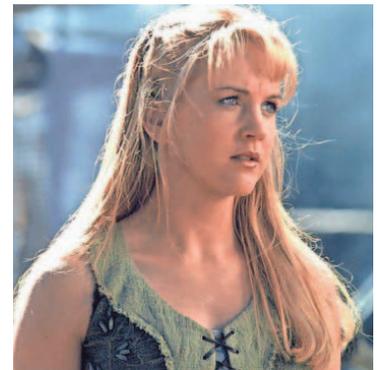
6. The themes of “Romeo and Juliet” still resonate, even with Millennials.

“It's a timeless story. Everything in it is stuff that happens to you every day,” said Muir. “People fighting each other over things that don't matter. Teenage disputes. It's so relevant to all the school shootings — pointless violence, and not that much is being done to stop things. History repeats itself. The story was told, all these kids died. And nothing much has changed.”

7. Mother and son are loving Tallahassee. She's enjoying the local restaurant scene. Her favorite so far? Kool Beanz. (“It was unbelievable, such great food!”) The Hideaway behind Waterworks has become their go-to morning coffee stop, and they've just discovered Lucy & Leo's cupcakes.

And he's a big fan of Tallahassee's trees.

“It's really lush, it reminds me of Mid-



Renee O'Connor was 23 when she started playing Gabrielle. DEMOCRAT FILES

dle Earth,” said Muir, whose father hails from New Zealand, where O'Connor met him while working on “Xena.”

“I was just there in New Zealand, and I was expecting Tallahassee to be like L.A. or Texas — hot and dry — but it's just beautiful. So green. I thought I got off at the wrong stop.”

“Romeo and Juliet” plays at Cascades Park May 10-13. It's free. Visit southernshakes.org.