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Bianca Montague gives a cast member direction as Melanie Bynum looks on AMANDA THOMPSON

BARDLINGS HAVE A 'NIGHT'

Young troupe presents a condensed version of play at Shakespeare Festival

Amanda Karioth Thompson Council on Culture & Arts

Shakespeare's legacy has endured for more than 400 years and there's no expiration date in sight. A new generation is embracing his works and putting their own spin on them. The Southern Shakespeare Company's junior troupe, the Bardlings, is currently rehearsing "Eighth Night," a condensed version of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" and they haven't lost any of the comedy's wit or whimsy.

The Bardlings company is comprised of local middle and high school actors. The group is co-directed by Robin Jackson and Bianca Montague who offer dramatic training as well as performance opportunities. Additionally, the Bardlings attend community theater productions and participate in specialized workshops.

The Bardlings will perform "Eighth Night" during the Southern Shakespeare Festival at

Cascades Park this weekend.

Montague shared that the students are also included in set building and stage management. "As much as we can, we involve them in every aspect so they understand everything that goes into the show, not just the performance part but all of it."

"Very rarely will we do straight Shakespeare. We'll change the setting or the time period but this year we wanted them to have a chance to do Shakespeare with a setting and costuming that's true to the time period. We decided instead of changing its theme, we'd shorten the play so they would take more time to learn the dialogue. The shortened version has helped them grasp the language and what the story is about."

Even in its adapted form, the play contains

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The Bardlings company is comprised of local middle and high school actors. AMANDA THOMPSON

Festival

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everything you'd expect from 'The Bard': a shipwreck, disguises, trickery, musical fools, unrequited love, mistaken identity and, of course, clever word play. That's where the Bardlings are concentrating much of their attention.

"They'll read something and think it means one thing and you change the meaning of one word and it changes the meaning of the whole sentence," said Montague. "They're like 'wow, I didn't realize that's what I was supposed to be saying his whole time.' You can always tell when it clicks. They're delivering the line and they've got the right inflection and the right attitude and you can tell they understand what they're saying. They get it."

Sean Ward is in sixth grade at The Magnolia School and he's enjoyed getting familiar with Shakespeare's language. "It's similar to ours but the grammar is different and it's harder to say." Sean has been cast in two roles as a sea captain and a priest. "It's fun to be someone else for a while," he said. "Even if you're a servant who's getting bullied tremendously, it's still fun. In real life it wouldn't be but here, it's fun because you know they're your friends. If you need an army, you have one."

Melanie Bynum agreed and added "you get an immediate family when you join any kind of production." The oldest Bardling, Melanie is in the 12th grade at SAIL High School and is dual enrolled as a full time student at Tallahassee Community College. One of her favorite parts of rehearsing is seeing how her cast mates interpret their characters and take inspiration from them. It's something she has done in past productions.

She played the title role in a recent production of "Antigone" at SAIL. "She's a very fierce, head-strong character who stands up for what she believes in," Melanie explained. "I really wanted to take that from

her personality and try to build it into my own because I lack confidence sometimes. Theater can help with your own self-identify, what you want in life and how you want to act."

In "Eighth Night" Melanie is cast as Viola, one of the principle characters who sacrifices her own desires for those of the man she's in love with. Viola's selflessness is something that Melanie admires and she finds Shakespeare's work to be as fitting in the modern day as it was centuries ago. "There are social issues that occurred then and are still occurring now and people can still get encouragement from characters like Viola."

This is exactly what Montague hopes her Bardlings take from their experience with Shakespeare. "He's got plays about royalty, plays about love, plays about family, deception and death. He covers it all, no matter where you've been in life, no matter where you're going, no matter where you are at that moment, there's something in Shakespeare you're going to relate to. There's a character, a story line, dialogue that's going to touch you. That's why he sticks around; that's why he's so relevant."

For middle and high school students, this is an especially important point. Montague explained, "they're going through probably one of the biggest changes that you go through in your lifetime. Their bodies are changing, their voices are changing, their way of thinking is changing. It's such a roller coaster there are so many highs and lows. Shakespeare is a great way for them to take all of those feelings and push it out there."

The Bardlings will perform "Eighth Night" during the Southern Shakespeare Festival at Cascades Park on May 12 and 13 at 5 p.m. Entrance to the festival is free of charge. For more information about the Bardlings, this production and all of the events planned for the festival, visit southernshakespearefestival.org

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).