

NEWS

Moorpark College, incarcerated youth partnership fosters empathy through theater

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This semester, a Moorpark College virtual showcase has special meaning for the cast and crew involved in two performances.

The shows, part of the college's Student One Acts event, are the product of a partnership between Moorpark College and the Ventura Correctional Youth Facility.

"It's been an incredible experience," said Moorpark student Rachael Gula, director of "Hell's Broken Heart." The play was written by Stella H. of the youth facility.

The full last names of the incarcerated youth were not shared due to privacy and safety concerns.

The performances were recorded and will be presented at the college's April 30 showcase along with other student content. This is the first time Moorpark students and youth from the facility are collaborating for the Student One Acts.

A collaboration unfolds

About two years ago, the youth facility approached Moorpark College faculty to offer college courses to their youth, according to a statement from the college.

"They have the ability to work on proficiency awards, certificates and associate degrees," the college said.

Moira MacDonald, an adjunct professor in Moorpark's theatre arts department, has been teaching classes on theater, acting and playwriting to youth at the facility in person pre-COVID-19 and over Zoom during the pandemic.

Fellow Moorpark professor Suzanne Fagan had experience bringing theater to "underserved and justice-involved communities" and was excited for the opportunity. This is her first time working directly with the facility youth.

"In our theater production course, THA M10, students get to direct and act in one acts that were written by students from the previous semester," said Fagan in the statement. "I want our college students to know how powerful theater is in building relationships and empathy and for healing."

The two plays by youth at the Camarillo facility are from MacDonald's playwriting class last semester. Out of dozens of plays written by hand, Fagan chose two — the one written by Stella, and "Tilikum" by Nathaniel G. The youth at the detention center do not have access to computers.

Fagan said she was surprised by the Greek themes in Stella's piece, and the Shakespearean-like dialogue in Nathaniel's.

Moorpark student Libby Adams, the assistant director for Stella's piece, said she thought Stella seemed so mature and adult based on the writing despite her young age.

"There is so much talent at the facility and they deserve their talent to be shown and they deserve our attention," Fagan said.

She then assigned two of her Moorpark students to direct a play. Libby's daughter, Ricci Bester Adams, took on Nathaniel's play and Gula took on Stella's.

Nathaniel said writing is new to him. Growing up, he said he wasn't very good at it. That said, his work has left an impression on Moorpark's theater students.

Fagan said the cast and crew are already looking to get more writing from Nathaniel.

"As a theater major, you read a lot of plays, but when I came across his, I was just like, 'This is just some awesome work.'" Bester Adams said. "And I'm glad that he

felt that not only Moorpark College, but one of us students could be trusted with his words, to bring his words to life."

Bringing the plays to life

The student directors, Bester Adams and Gula, did their casting in January. Those chosen for parts range in age from 16 to 60. A lot of the early work consisted of bonding and getting the cast and crew comfortable with each other.

Nathaniel said "Tilikum" is based on a real life situation. The director described the work as "a college student coming into his own" with side characters adding pressure in a comedic way.

Bester Adams said the bonding was key to make the portrayed friendships look natural.

"Hell's Broken Heart" is more of a fantasy. Gula said the play "tells the story of a misunderstood heroine's quest for vengeance."

The play follows Lady Discord as she strays from her birthplace in the underworld to indulge in a romance. She also deals with family trauma.

The actors incorporated American Sign Language and puppets into the storytelling for Stella's play. Through an interpreter, Megan Clancy — a deaf actress who has worked for the nonprofit Deaf West Theatre, commercials and movies — said it was cool seeing fellow actors learn the language and incorporate it into the play.

Lucia Salazar-Davidson, who plays Lady Discord, is contributing original music. She said it's the first time her music will be published this way.

As part of the class, Fagan explained those involved in the plays on Moorpark's side have had something due every Friday like something to do with costuming or set design. Stella and Nathaniel attended virtual meetings for one hour every week.

"As an actor, just to have the playwright in the room with you is crazy," said Salazar-Davidson.

While it is a bit intimidating, she explained that it allows her to ask questions about the way her character should be portrayed.

Student One Acts

Bester Adams said the cast of "Tilikum" decided early on that they would be filming via Zoom instead of recording together.

"I was like all right, you know what, we'll do this big massive experiment of filming a film on Zoom and trying to make it as realistic as possible," she recalled.

She said the cast helped out with their knowledge and experience, especially because everything was done on green screen, which involves filming in front of a solid color later replaced during the video editing process.

Stella's "Hell's Broken Heart" was filmed half in-person at Moorpark College, and half self-taped by the individual actor, according to Gula.

As of last week, Fagan said the plays' videos were being edited.

Megan Mishkanian, who plays a supporting role in "Hell's Broken Heart," said she has had a really great experience.

"It was a creative challenge, and I say that with a lot of love," she said.

"This experience has really been incredible because it's brought a lot of different people from a lot of different walks of life all together," said Clancy.

"Hell's Broken Heart" and "Tilikum" will be shown during Moorpark College's April 30 Student One Acts at 8 p.m., an event typically held every semester. This event is virtual and free.

More information, including the link to the showcase, is available at bit.ly/3dIWYNB.

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