

SUPERINTENDENT'S BRIEF

Together, We are the Champions for Children in Poughkeepsie City School District

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Theater productions return to PMS

Poughkeepsie Middle School hasn't put on a play in roughly two decades. But while the school may be inexperienced when it comes to theater, many of its students are not. And, they intend on impressing audiences this week. Forty-one PMS students will put on a production of "High School Musical Jr." at the school's auditorium, with performances Thursday and Friday evenings. The shows not only mark the return of theatre productions at the school but the next step in the evolution of the Poughkeepsie City School District's emphasis on arts education.

"I think audiences are going to really enjoy the songs, how we sound. We know the music by heart," sixth grader J'Anna

Campbell said. "Also, our dances, and the actors, and how the lights are set up – everybody does a really amazing job."

The district in recent years has established a Comprehensive Arts Education Plan, hired additional faculty to ensure there are full-time art and music teachers for all schools, and launched such programs as the Smart Scholars Early College Performing Arts Program. The genesis of this week's shows, though, dates to 2022.

That's when Krieger Elementary began its annual productions under director Nicole Schmitt. Now, many of the third and fourth grade students who took part in that first performance of "Annie" are sixth and seventh graders taking part in "High School Musical Jr."

"It's really amazing to have these kids – for some of them, this is their fifth production in four years – it's really special for them," Schmitt said before Monday's rehearsal. While she estimates more than half of this week's cast took part in "Annie," including the two leads, "there are a lot of new students who are playing main roles. It's really nice to see new kids gravitate to this and show so much talent."

In all, there are 29 members of the cast and 12 crew members, including several students with exceptionalities taking part in each aspect. The play itself stays fairly true to the original Disney movie released in 2006, Schmitt said, with 11 fully choreographed musical numbers that are "just phenomenal. The audience will be clapping along and getting into it."



High School Musical Jr.

What: Poughkeepsie Middle School play

Where: The school's auditorium, 55 College Ave.

When: Thursday, May 15 and Friday, May 16; doors open at 5:45 p.m. and shows begin promptly at 6 p.m.

Cost: Free



Students ran through one of their final rehearsals Monday afternoon.



Students also did the bulk of the work painting the set, and two students, including seventh grader Melody Jean-Charles, are operating the soundboard. "It's quite fun," Jean-Charles said of the role. "You get to see the actors do their stuff and you help the actors, too." Campbell said she hadn't seen the movie until hearing about the play and considering auditioning. She said her best friend wanted to try out for the role of Sharpay Evans, played by Ashley Tisdale in the movie, but she gravitated toward Sharpay's brother, Ryan, and the pair auditioned

together and got the parts.

"I thought Ryan was a good character," Campbell said. "He's funny. He can sing. And I felt like that was me."

Several of the students had some acting experience despite not attending Krieger. Some participated in districtwide elementary productions, which return next week with two performances of "Moana Jr." Campbell said, "Performing is fun. You can portray different roles in normal life you're not used to. You can be a different person."

"High School Musical" itself is relatable to many young adults through a story based around students breaking free of expectations and embracing who they are underneath.

"It's a bunch of cliques – a basketball clique, a brainiac clique, a theater clique – and nobody does anything outside of what they do," Schmitt said of where the school is at the beginning of the story. "This whole play is about trying new things and making new friends, making new experiences for yourself and broadening everything you do."

Schmitt praised the speed at which the middle school students learned roles and choreography compared to those at the elementary level. Though, she noted, this is the natural evolution of the district's theatre emphasis. "I'm so happy to see this program growing at the secondary level," she said. "In two years our high school will have a major cast and crew."

Both the Thursday and Friday shows begin at 6 p.m. sharp; doors open at 5:45 p.m. They also planned a students-only show for Wednesday afternoon.

As the performances approached, Campbell admitted to feeling the nerves, especially when it came to performing in front of classmates. But, she was also eager to put on a show.

"I'm excited to see what everybody thinks of the play. I think we did an amazing job," she said. "We've been working so hard. I'm very excited."

Morse students ready for circus show at Bardavon

Sean Fagan spent part of Wednesday morning teaching three Morse Elementary fifth grade students how to hit him with wooden boards.

It was important, he told them, that each of the students make contact in a different way and that it all look accidental. That's how you get the biggest laugh from the room.

"As you go by, find a creative way to bonk me," Fagan said.

"Put it up on your shoulder and keep it flat. You're going to miss me if you're crooked."

Of course, this wasn't part of the normal daily curriculum. The wooden boards were actually made of foam. And the subject Fagan was teaching Wednesday morning was clowning.



Morse fifth graders rehearse a firefighter clown routine at the school Wednesday.



For the last eight school days, roughly 100 Morse fifth grade students have been practicing skills like juggling, balancing, tumbling and, yes, clowning. It's an annual unit that will culminate with a performance at the Bardavon 1869 Opera House 6 p.m. Thursday. Admission is free; there is a \$6 suggested donation.

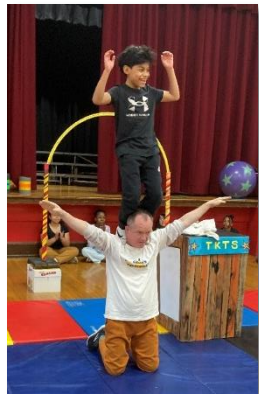
Fagan – who the kids know by his stage name of Seano – has brought his Seano's Circus Theatricks program to Poughkeepsie elementary schools for a quarter of a century and, for the last decade, to Morse.

The idea is for every fifth grade student to gain confidence that they can learn a skill foreign to them in a matter of days, and then take the stage in front of friends and family to perform it.

Each class specializes in a different group of circus skills, though there is some overlap, so the students experience more than one area. The clowning instruction includes some tumbling and acrobatics, while the balancing unit offers

several apparatuses to try, from stilts to a giant ball. Fagan gets a feel for each student's comfort and ability levels during the opening days of the unit to direct them to a skill they can learn and feel a sense of accomplishment. For the more skilled students, he increases the difficulty as the session goes on. He tries to find at least one thing every student can do and perform.

Every year's group and show are different, Fagan said. This year, he noted, a class of students with exceptionalities is taking part. He's incorporating a plate-spinning skill for them into the show, in which they not only try to pass the plates from one student to the next but also place them onto a wooden cactus, among other tricks. "It's just fun," he said. "It's a lovely group of kids. They're very sweet. They hug me at the end of class."



The clowning class Wednesday practices routines in which a student chases another dressed in a giant pie costume, one student douses another dressed as a firefighter with water, and a construction skit that, yes, involves those foam planks. The students were practicing catching the planks in such a way that their exaggerated reactions cause their hard hats to come off.

"The fact that the hat pops off, that's going to make every second grader in the audience laugh," Fagan explained. "That's what funny is, bringing joy."

Tickets for the show are available at the Bardavon box office, at 35 Market St. More information is available at Bardavon.org.



Clowning class on Wednesday featured a mix of comedy routines and balancing practice.

Morse Circus Theatricks

Where: The Bardavon 1869 Opera House, 35 Market Street

When: Thursday, May 15, 6 p.m.

Cost: Free (suggested donation \$6)

Livestream Senior Signing Day

Poughkeepsie High School will hold its annual Senior Signing Day Thursday and you can watch a livestream on the [district's Facebook page](#) beginning at 8:30 a.m.

Each year the event celebrates graduating seniors and their future plans.

Much like blue chip athletes hold signing spectacles to announce where they will compete in college, each Poughkeepsie student gets a moment in the spotlight at the event to sit at a table and sign a keepsake book with their name and future plans, while friends are invited to swarm them with cameras like members of the media. The event also features live music, food and a photo wall for taking photos with each other. Students are invited to wear clothing relating to their future plans, be it their college's shirt or otherwise.

This year roughly 100 students will be taking part in the day. Visit the Facebook page to watch along.

