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Aldrich musical has charms to slay the savage beast

By CHERYL RICHARDS

The black dragon with the fiery breath can only be seen if you acknowledge the evil it represents. Don't acknowledge its presence, the evil doesn't disappear. It just chokes the life out of everything, eventually killing it.

Pretty abstract and heady stuff, isn't it?

Not to more than 70 students at Aldrich Junior High School, who will present a play this weekend about this very topic.

Ann O'Grady, a teacher at Aldrich, explained that the student/actors are in the enrichment opportunities program, a program for gifted and talented students.

Junior High students Vanessa Carnewale, Anne Hackman, Jennifer Aubin and Melissa Gillooly wrote the grant for the production. The grant included a 23-page form which outlined items such as the projected budget and who would be hired for particular tasks. They were eventually awarded $2,500 for the production from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts.

Part of the money was used to pay for Regna Padula, a theater student at Brown University, who assisted the students in writing the script and casting, and Ray Sweeten, a 16-year-old musical director who wrote and recorded music for the production.

Researching a theme

Deciding to base their performance on bringing awareness to the plight of the needy, several students then interviewed people in the social services field and attended a conference which addressed the issue. Students kept two folders, one with problems facing the needy and the other with possible solutions. The research portion of the program took up the students' first quarter of school.

Then students spoke with Edward Fracassa, head of the physical education department who had been to Haiti several times and told the students tales of his travels. Catching the students interest was the Haitian word "dechoukaj," which means the uprooting of evil.

The students had found their theme, as well as the title of the play, The Land of Dacarshu (while dechoukaj is the Haitian word, it is pronounced dacarshu, which is included in the play’s title). The preface of the musical’s script reads: “Our play is based on this idea. To alleviate world problems, the causes of evil must be uprooted. The Tree of Life is being strangled by evil roots (political, economic, environmental, and social evils), so Regnuh, the hunger dragon, rules in this kingdom. To free the Tree of Life so it can flourish, people must recognize Regnuh’s danger and then work together to uproot the evil and nurture the tree.” Regnuh is hunger spelled backwards.

Regnuh’s four villains who command the roots that are strangling the tree of life are Fubbos, who represents political evil; Cashus, who represents economic disaster; Vuros, who represents environmental disasters; and Calamity, who represents social instabilities.

On with the show

Once the basic theme of the play was decided, eighth-grade students were broken up into groups and given tasks, such as writing riddles which are a part of the plot. Students wrote the play, painted the backdrop and will perform the play.

Students will perform the play for various classrooms March 6. Later that evening, they will perform for the public. The evening performances will be held in the Aldrich Junior High School auditorium at 7 and 9 p.m. Donations will be solicited and proceeds will go to various agencies which provide relief to the needy.

In addition to the performance of the musical, audiences will be entertained by the Holden-Rhodes chorus under the direction of Anita Soutas, as well as Aldrich’s Chances to Dance which will perform selections from “Godspell.” The theme of the evening’s performance is appropriately named “Food for Thought.”

Of the production, O'Grady says, “The amazing thing is that you actually have kids writing a musical.”