

THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

Much ado about backpacking: Campers play the trail

By Catherine Stirling

This summer, rising Washington International sophomore Katie Goldberg and 11 other young actors took their show on the road – literally, to the Appalachian Trail.

The Traveling Players Ensemble, based at Camp Calleva in Poolesville, Md., learned Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" and then took a backpacking trip to camp and perform on Skyline Drive.

The camp, conceived by founder and artistic director Jeanne Harrison, is an intense four-week program that marries professional theater training with outdoor adventure. The result is an unusual experience designed to yield artists with a sense of adventure.

"I wanted young actors to see that it's OK to get dirty," Harrison said, "... that they don't have to be precious with their art. Being precious is never useful. This program creates actors who are adventurous and adaptable."

Cleveland Park resident Goldberg had been a camper at Calleva for several years before joining up with Traveling Players in 2003 for its first season.

"It's very different from learning a play in a school setting," Goldberg said. "There's just so much more. Here you don't just learn the play; you also go through all the work. We do all our own tech, so there's that whole self-reliance thing. We're not just actors who get stuff handed to us on silver platters."

In addition to theater skills, campers learn survival skills, which, in turn, support their acting skills, said Harrison. "Learning survival skills teaches independence and security," she said. "Artists need to be adventurous."

Campers do a ropes course, where they learn to communicate and work with each other – skills that "are at the heart of being in an ensemble and at the heart of acting," Harrison said. "A scene is never about you, the actor; it's always about what's happening between you and the rest of the ensemble."

For the first three weeks, campers stay at home, going to Poolesville each day and for one overnight a week. The first week is spent casting the play and the next two weeks are spent learning lines and rehearsing. Then the campers hit the road to camp and perform at the Skyland Amphitheater, a small, low-tech outdoor theater on Skyline Drive. They pitch their tents near the theater, and take day hikes, returning to perform each night.

This year, Goldberg had planned to do the first session and then go on vacation with her parents, but she persuaded them to let her stay with her grandparents in Reston, Va., so she could remain with Traveling Players for the second session.

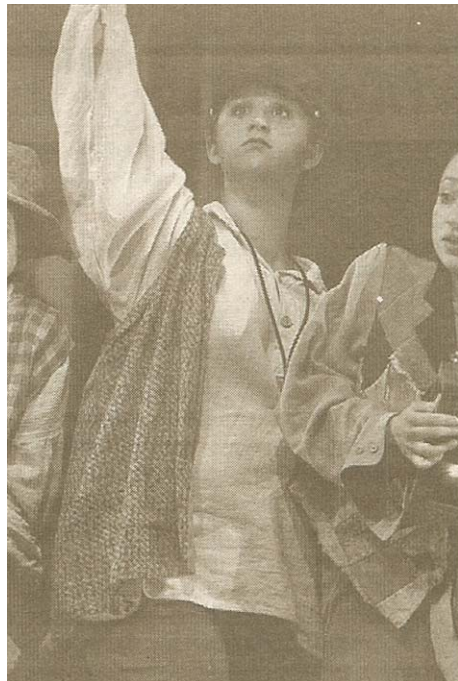
She therefore had an opportunity to learn multiple roles. She first played the nurturing Ursula, then the regal and emotionally charged mother Leonata (Leonato in the original), and finally the role of Dogberry, the wacky comic lead. The adjustments earned her rave reviews from her director.

“She’s very communicative,” said Harrison. “She’s brilliant with language, with rhythms, with timing. She’s bold and wacky and willing. And she’s dear to my heart because she’s one of the Traveling Players originals. Every time we’ve offered something, she’s been there.”

This year saw a dramatic twist to the Traveling Players formula. The troop was invited to perform at the Kennedy Center’s Millennium Stage, which provided the young actors with yet another lesson in adaptability. The cast had one week to cut their 100-minute play down to 60 minutes, reshuffling roles along the way.

But Sunday night’s performance was flawless, at least from the audience perspective. (“There’s no such thing as a flawless performance,” Goldberg quipped.) There appeared to be no missed lines, no missed cues, and certainly no missed laughs.

Goldberg summed up the difference between performing al fresco at the Skyland Amphitheater and playing at Millennium Stage in a few short words: “Air conditioning, no crickets, no rain, and no thunderstorms – I could get used to this.”



Bill Petros/The Current

Katie Goldberg spent the summer performing Shakespeare on the Appalachian Trail.