FOURTH-GRADE STUDENTS ADD WRITING CREDITS TO BUDDING RESUMES

“A once in a lifetime opportunity” is how nine and 10-year-olds are describing the unique 12-week Introduction to Theatre workshop that resulted in their writing an original musical that debuted Saturday. Titled “The Moon Watchers: Musical Legends Told Under the Stars”, the hour-long production was developed, written and choreographed by 13 University School fourth-grade students under the tutelage of USchool teacher and Lovewell Institute for the Creative Arts member, Ms. Tobi Nagy.

“When I first came, I thought that [the Lovewell process] was just a regular, normal show where you just performed and it was done,” said USchool fourth-grade student and Moon Watcher Aiden Pasternak. “But I found out that it is not just that. You learn a lot. And you learn how to work together to build something that you can’t do on your own.”

“When Ms. Nagy said we were going to get to write the show I thought that I would have fun,” added Moon Watcher Bianca Taylor. “Other plays that I have been in you don’t get to do this. It’s like a life opportunity, but you could do it again.”

“I kind of agree with her,” chimed Moon Watcher Schaefer Grant. “I’ve done musicals before but I’ve never actually written them. …It’s like a once in a lifetime opportunity. How many kids in Lower School have written a musical?”

Within me there is boundless creative power.

Entering a “Moon Watchers” rehearsal seems more akin to walking in on a business team-building retreat than a workshop with fourth-grade students. Energy builds as Ms. Nagy begins each session with daily affirmations that the students repeat after her in clear, strong voices. Mixed in today are additional tips to help prepare the young collaborators for the swift-approaching opening night:

“Within me there is boundless creative power. I am now, at this moment all that I need to be.

“This affirmation is something that you are going to learn how to use a lot before you get on stage and right before you get really, really nervous. There are lots of people there and you have different scenes and lines to memorize, but you always have to remember that you are all that you need to be, and this show is all that it needs to be.”

The pattern of proclamation and affirmation resumes.

“I am now at this moment all that I need to be. I visualize perfection daily until I breathe it into expression. I am pure energy and awareness. All of my needs will always be supplied by my understanding of creativity. I have a kind thought for everyone. May we create today in the spirit of cooperation and joy.”

The students appear to sit “taller” as eyes open and grins spread.

Schaefer makes sure that today’s recipient of Ms. Nagy’s kind thoughts heard the teacher’s words of gratitude: “Ms. Sontag, all of Ms. Nagy’s kind thoughts go to you for letting us invade your space for 12 weeks.”

The classroom’s owner smiles and Ms. Nagy continues:
“All right, we are going to take a deep breath. Now let me in silence reaffirm why I am here.”

After a few moments, Ms. Nagy proceeds with a recap of the last week’s agenda: “All right you guys, we are going to do a lot of work today, a lot of work on Thursday, a lot of work on Friday, a lot of work on Saturday, a lot of work on Sunday, and then it’s all going to be over.”

Exclamations of “Aw” ensue at mention of the workshop’s end, accompanied by fake sniffling and even a few pretend sobs. After all, these youngsters are now not only writers, composers and choreographers; they are also performers.

“Can I do two shows?” one young writer calls out. Ms. Nagy laughs and answers, “No, because next we are going to do the fifth grade show.”

I am all that I need to be.

According to the institute’s website, the “Lovewell Method” encourages students to express their own ideas, feelings and emotions so that “the students become active contributors to the educational process rather than passive learners.” In the case of “The Moon Watchers,” this active contribution opened opportunities that our young students took to heart.

“Peter Travisano wanted to play his trumpet so we let him play his trumpet. Catherine Robinson really wanted to write poetry so her [legend] is a whole poem. We said, ‘tell us what you want to do, tell us what makes you excited’, said Ms. Nagy. “We really played on their talents. Evan’s is a song and tap dance. Schaefer’s is a dance, and she sings too. She sings opera, very high falsetto; it’s crazy. Some [students] didn’t want to sing at all by themselves. So we let them.”

Seeing the results of this test approach in the high-level work created by fourth-graders – most of whom she has seen grow up through the years at University School -- gave Lower School director Dr. Barnes “the chills.” “I look at them and I’m like ‘What? You made up that so You made up that song?’ And they are just beaming with pride, which is really what it is all about,” Dr. Barnes said.

“I think that stepping back, the real purpose in the Lower School is to give children opportunities to find and develop their interests,” Dr. Barnes added. “Ms. Nagy mentioned doing a Lovewell-type show and I thought ‘perfect’. It really created a pathway for [the students’] all-encompassing involvement with a theatre production.”

“Hopefully these kids will not only take from this experience, but make it into so many other experiences,” Ms. Nagy said. “They will always be able to think back about how they wrote a musical when they were in the fourth-grade, and they’ll be able to write that on their college application. These students are nine, 10, and now they are composers, writers and choreographers. And they get to carry that with them forever.”

“My favorite part was writing,” said Moon Watcher Evan Eigrash. “I like dialog and I love when we’re all sitting at a table and [Ms. Nagy or Mr. Gilbert] ask ‘What should he say now?’ Now we actually have our characters and we are memorizing our lines, and it’s really cool to stage everything. …The lines become much more powerful when you actually do them.”

I am pure energy and awareness.

Ms. Nagy was only a few years older than her pupils when a drama teacher encouraged her to attend a Lovewell summer camp fortuitously hosted that year in University School’s Sonken Building. She has remained involved with Lovewell ever since, and currently serves as director of media and design for the Fort Lauderdale-based program. During summer break, Nagy also leads musical writing workshops for Lovewell, most recently traveling to Sweden to facilitate a bi-lingual musical writing project. (No, Ms. Nagy is not Swedish; she just conducts creative collaborations really well.) This year with Dr. Barnes’ blessing -- and the help of fellow staff members Andrew Gilbert (music director), Gabby Groten (assistant director), and Josefine Sigvant (choreographer) -- she brought Lovewell back to the place where she first fell in love with the method.

Moon Watcher Andrea Murcia sums up the experience this way: “When I first got here I thought that we were never going to finish this musical, and I thought I was just going to be a fourth-grader. Now I’m not just a fourth-grader. I wrote a musical!”
“My favorite thing was deciding the title, the subtitle, and what the show was going to be about,” said Moon Watcher Samantha Feder-Trosclair. “And we had separate groups writing different scenes. It was fun.”

The children’s only requirement in determining what the musical would be about was that the subject and development process must involve social studies. With this in mind, Ms. Nagy led brainstorming sessions throughout the first week, and then conducted research to find a starting subject based upon the children’s ideas.

“I remember Ms. Nagy came in one day and she said ‘I have the greatest idea.’ Combining it all together and based on what we’ve been talking about she thought of Native Americans,” Aiden explained. “And everyone started saying ‘great idea, great idea.’ So at the end we decided that [the subject] was going to be Native Americans, and we took a vote.”

Schaefer chimed in: “I am hooked on two things: Greek Gods and Native Americans. I didn’t really know what this play was going to be about because we were going to write it. I just love anything Native American.”

“Learning about the Native American legends was pretty fun, and since I have some family that is Native American it was actually pretty cool to learn different things about their culture,” Bianca added.

With the subject determined Ms. Nagy next set out to find a source of inspiration that that could aid the group’s quest to write a musical featuring 13 main characters while incorporating Native American culture. Her search led her to the book “Long Night Moon” by Cynthia Rylant, which she read to her apt pupils. Inside the book’s front cover was an intriguing prompt: “Have you ever stopped to consider what might be revealed in one spot over one year by twelve unique and exquisite full moons?”

“We researched some [of the Native American legends] on the internet and then we gave them a twist. We gave them more imagination,” said Moon Watcher Ekaterina (Katya) Arutyunyan.

Thus the Moon Watchers were born, as was a unique explanation (and underlying story thread) as to why 13 “Moon Watchers” gathered at a tree house on an ancient Native American reservation instead of 12. The students’ answer was simple: One Moon Watcher wanted to share her full moon story with a friend.

The students also used their musical to help answer another question: “Why do you love the moon do much?”

“Well because it’s like literally amazing,” explained Katya. “Ms. Cantor read us a book about the moon and we were like ‘wow the moon has so many stories of how it was created, but [the moon] never has stories of why she is there and what the full moon does each month.’ And I think that’s what we do in the musical.”

With creativity and imagination, however, also comes artistic license, warned a few of the musical’s young writers.

“As Katya said, we did research and we did a little twist to [the legends],” said Moon Watcher Isabella Bermingham. One student chimed in an example of how their Full Strawberry Moon legend is similar and the characters are Native American… but they are also hip-hop bunny sisters, leading Isabella to add: “I just want anybody who ever sees the show to know that they shouldn’t believe all of the legend.”

“But they’re mostly true,” Katya whispers back.
May we create today in a spirit of cooperation and joy.

Do not let the fact that nine and 10-year-olds wrote a musical lure anyone into thinking that the process was an easy one.

“It doesn’t really matter what age you are. You can do a play if you want. It only matters what you decide,” said Moon Watcher Shornam Gandhi. “It was really hard though. [Writing] took about six weeks. And then we came on stage and it was a whole new thing because we all had to spread out and it was like re-blocking everything.

“For two or three of the practices we could always hold our books and write down everything, but after that you would have to start memorizing your lines, memorizing the dance moves and getting everything down,” Shornam continued. “When [Ms. Nagy] said we only had 12 weeks it seemed like ‘oh, we can write a play in that little time’, and then when we started doing all this we thought it was going to take forever and we never going to get through it.”

“It was interesting to see a play written by kids our own age,” said ensemble member Alexa Bond.

“But I couldn’t tell it was written by kids,” said fellow ensemble Erin Miller. “I liked the bunny scene and I also liked the music in Full Thunder Moon,” the girls added.

Similar to how the students’ found a way to incorporate a 13th Moon Watcher, Ms. Nagy found a way to incorporate additional fourth-grade students who were not able to commit to a 12-week workshop, but who still wished to participate in the production. Toward the end of the show, a different Moon Watcher is inspired to invite the entire town to share in the wonder of the Full Frosty Moon. His fellow Moon Watchers realize that ‘if [the townspeople] see this place, they will see how important it is to us,’ and ‘if you think about it, we share the moon with everyone in the world.’

“I felt really excited because I couldn’t do [the musical] the whole time because I had a lot of after school activities,” Alexa said. “I looked at the dates for practicing, and [being in the ensemble] was only three days. I asked my mom and she said I could do it and I was one of the first ones to put my [participation] form in.”

“Ms. Nagy has done an incredible job of bringing this whole concept to life,” Dr. Barnes said. “She had this great idea of including children who couldn’t commit the time to be involved which I think was just genius.”

In addition to being able to offer an alternative way for more students to be involved, Ms. Nagy also wanted the ensemble students to share in the affirmations, “kind-thinking” and sense of collaboration woven throughout the workshop for the 12-week participants.

“When everybody gets here, we’re going to do kind thoughts and we are going to build everybody up,” Ms. Nagy insisted. “Because sometimes [theatre] makes you feel ‘I’m not as good as this person. I’m not as good as that person. And she sings better than me.’ But not here. Here we are all equals. [The students] all have to be cooperative and be happy together and bring each other up. And these kids get it. They have an advantage because they have this bond of creation.”

“I thought this was going to be really amazing, and it turned out to be really cool,” added Moon Watcher Gracie Rivero. “We hardly ever get many opportunities to do this.”

“And we have the best cast in the world with Ms. Nagy, Josephine, Mr. Gilbert and Gabby!” exclaimed Moon Watcher Faraaz Sadruddin, which promptly made all of the students start giggling with an intermittent “whoop, whoop”. 
Now let me in silence reaffirm why I am here.

A poem by Moon Watcher Catherine Robinson captures the spirit of the show’s final full moon and of the production process drawing to a close:

Long Night Moon comes when the year is done,
She lights the sky like a midnight sun.

This moon is faithful to all who gaze,
We depend on her to light our ways.

She ends the year with a brand new start,
Long Night Moon has done her part.

Now we gather with family and friends,
To celebrate as the lunar year ends.

Congratulations to all our talented fourth-grade students who “did their part” for this “brand new start,” and a warm thank-you to the parents, staff and student show-day workers who helped our students shine like midnight Suns.

Footnotes:
“The Moon Watchers: Musical Legends Told Under the Stars” will be submitted to the Lovewell catalog with 13 University School students listed as the musical’s authors.

Photographs should post this week to the Media Gallery, followed by a video of the show once editing is complete.