

Swamp Meadow's Tending to Grace Is Heartwarming

Not every young adult novel has the power to transform a teacher into a playwright, but after years of teaching *Tending to Grace* for its use of literary devices, a stage adaptation began to take shape in Laurie Murphy's mind. With the blessing of the author and the support of Swamp Meadow Community Theatre, that vision has come to fruition with a world premiere at the Captain Isaac Paine Auditorium (in the very school where Murphy taught) in Foster.

If you're looking for local theater, this production is the epitome. There is nothing about this show that isn't local, including that it was written and co-directed by a Foster teacher; even the original source material is by local author Kimberly Newton Fusco, who will be present at some performances.

Tending to Grace is a coming-of-age, finding-your-voice story - you know the type. It follows the story of Cornelia (Becca Kilday), a bibliophile who seldom talks on account of her stutter. Her inattentive mother, Lenore (Julia Rose Arnold), and Lenore's even worse boyfriend, Joe (Mike Grandy), skip town to seek their fortune in Vegas, leaving Cornelia with her eccentric aunt Agatha (Kaila Rubin) out in the country. As she adjusts to her new life of gardening and frog racing, Cornelia gradually finds her voice through teaching Agatha and her new friend, Bo (Holly Lotter).

Any role involving a speech disorder presents the challenge of portraying it as genuinely as possible, and Kilday nails it. Her body language is also perfect as someone trying to fold up and disappear. Though Cornelia doesn't talk a lot, her inner monologue is rich with literary language, and this is where the prose of the novel is best represented.

Lotter's Bo stands out as a quirky but kind farm girl who befriends Cornelia, unconcerned by her stutter or her tendency to hold the world at arm's length. Among the more memorable scenes in the show is when the two try to catch a frog, lunging across the creek, giggling all the while.

Because it's a community theater production, it's not without its problems: A few sound issues and some sloppy transitions disrupt the flow. The set is minimal with a table, some chairs, a podium and a few benches, but for a story like this, an extravagant set isn't required. In fact, the minimalism only strengthens the actors' performances: Agatha drinks imaginary tea made on an imaginary stove, she and Cornelia are bounced around as they drive an imaginary, rundown truck, children race imaginary frogs, etc. On the other hand, it is kind of funny when they enter the library to find the (real) book they happen to need standing among imaginary books on imaginary shelves.

The main characters, namely, Cornelia, Agatha and Bo, are doubled in an effort to showcase more of the talents Swamp Meadow has to offer, so the second weekend will feature different performers in these roles than the ones I saw during the first weekend. For the second round of performances, Cornelia will be played by Alice Lear, Agatha will be played by Merynn Flynn and Bo will be played by Hetta Coleman.

Tending to Grace probably won't be heading to Broadway any time soon, but it's a heartwarming story, and it has a talented cast. Fans of the book, as well as supporters of local theater, will enjoy this production.

Swamp Meadow's Tending to Grace runs through Nov 19. For tickets, visit swampmeadow.org.