

# Children take the stage

The Dispatch Wednesday, August 5, 1981 C9



Dispatch photo by Don Smith

Childrens Theater players at the high school practice for Legend of Sleepy Hollow.

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Special to the Dispatch

Children's theater — it smacks of brassy mothers dragging behind them whiny children in cascades of yellow curls, of plays attended by grumbling fathers who would have preferred going bowling, of neighbors buying tickets for opening night and then feigning illness and not showing.

"Not so," says Darin Kerby, making curves in the air with slender hands. "This is the future of the theater." And, he suggests, not only the future of the theater, but the future of The Arts, and with The Arts, the history of Western Society.

It sounds like a heavy load for the Gilroy Children's Theater production of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

Kerby is director of a summer program of children's theater that has attracted Gilroy and Morgan Hill "children" from age 8 to 18. If anyone questions the interest of area children in theater, they should be reassured, for 70 auditioned for the production.

The cast for the adaptation of Washington Irving's classic short story called for 21 parts. Kerby took one look at the turnout on audition day and added some parts so he was able to cast 45. How does one do that? By, as an example, making the narrator's part into seven parts.

But basically, for all the highfalutin talk about The Arts, children's theater is just plain old

summer fun with a chance for spinoffs in the future that might add to the appreciation of the cultural history of America.

Without a thought to those abstractions, the cast is putting together a musical show that will hit the boards Friday and Saturday, Aug. 7, 8, 14, 15 at Gilroy High School Auditorium, with curtain at 8 p.m.

Children's theater comes in two varieties — the type used in the past by Gavilan College, which involves older actors playing to children; and the type that Kerby is

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working with, which involves children playing for adults.

"This is where people start professionally" in the hyperactive latter half of the 20th Century. Children begin at age 3 and 4 doing television commercials and modeling. One 7-year-old has been taking ballet lessons since she was 4, and that is not unusual, Kerby claims.

Kerby comes from a different starting block and regrets his lack of experience as he started at the bottom at the old age of 18. After the lead, at age 13 in a school production of *Tom Sawyer*, Kerby,

who looks like a grown-up version of the Mark Twain character, dropped acting until his mother, Beverly Vasquez, was cast in *Oliver* at Gavilan College Theater and talked him into auditioning. In the two years since, he has appeared in 15 shows, including *Charlie's Aunt*, *Red Dawg*, and presently in Great America's summer production of *The Music Man*. A graduate of Gavilan College, he has been accepted at UCLA in the prestigious Theater Arts major and will enter there in the autumn as a junior.

The thought of gaining experience as a director is what prompted Kerby's desire to bring *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* to Gilroy. He got the backing of the Gilroy Community Theater and was on his way with the John Davidson play.

Kerby noted he has been extremely fortunate with the play. It called for a Virginia Reel but he had no available music. "Does anyone know anyone who can play a violin?" he asked the cast. A 10-year-old stepped forward, said he could play the violin, and does.

Money is always a concern GCT has come up with \$2,000 to underwrite the production. That goes for lights, paint, wood and materials for the costumes. It pays the director; the music director Shelly Andrews; the choreographer, Curtis Caudill; and the piano accompanist, Norma Fellows. The need for additional funds was met with a car wash.

More help came from the stag

production class at Gilroy High School under the direction of Jim Maya. The class helped building sets after the GHS production of *West Side Story* was completed and before the end of school.

For those of you who have forgotten, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* involves Ichabod Crane (Mark Masoni); the Headless Horseman; Ichabod's nemesis Bones Brom (Richard Burdick); his not-so-true love, Katrina (Katie Amstutz); Katrina's sister, Gretchen (Annetka Jones); and the sisters' parents (Rick Torres and Franca Barsi).

The challenge of working with children is that they forget so quickly and their attention span is so short. Rehearsal schedules are built around those facts. Kerby said that the main difference between professional and amateur theater is the time it takes to prepare for production. What might take a professional actor two weeks to learn will take an amateur three months. Additionally, if a particular character has 20 qualities, it is possible on the professional stage to find someone with those 20 qualities. But with amateurs, a director might be able to find someone with only 15 of those qualities. The remaining five qualities must be worked out in direction — and that takes time.

The character of Ichabod Crane is one that is already set in the mind of those who will attend the play. Kerby looked for someone who came close to putting together those qualities.

Masoni, a college student, is tall, thin and has a nasal pattern of speech that "plays beautifully."

"I lucked out," Kerby noted.

If all goes well, and so far it seems to be, Kerby plans to return next summer to direct another children's theater production. He already has a play in mind — Peter Pan.

As for the future: "Gilroy will have a full-fledged professional theater company within 10 years," Kerby predicted. Obviously, the young director would like to be a part of the Gilroy theater scene in the years ahead.