

'Appleseed' bears fruit of dream for children's theater

By Stephen Snyder, Times Staff Writer Carroll County Times, Thursday, May 16, 2002

Westminster resident Diane W. Jones has been a co-director of the **Children's Chorus of Carroll County** for the past 15 year. She was also a school teacher for 25 years, teaching at William Winchester Elementary School among others.

So directing more than 30 children for "Johnny Appleseed," a musical version of the American folk tale, isn't so daunting.

"With kids, you have to repeat things over and over and be very specific," Jones said at a rehearsal Monday at Elmer A. Wolfe Elementary School, where the production, along with an adult performance of "True Blue & Trusted," directed by Arnie Hayes, will take place. "But that's probably it because children are just as talented and creative [as adults]."

When the idea of a community theater in Union Bridge was conceived by Hayes and Elmer Wolfe principal Dr. Mary Stong, children were the chief consideration.

Many community theaters are primarily for adults or high school students, but Hayes and Stong wanted a group that children could participate in as well.

"I thought kids were going to be hard to work with, but they're not," said assistant director Susan Thornton.

Thornton brought her daughter to the audition and, after mentioning that she had a bachelor of fine arts degree in theater, was quickly recruited to help direct.

During the rehearsal, Jones and Thornton could often be found bustling back and forth in front of the stage, yelling out stage directions and gesturing effusively.

Jones and Thornton worked on every aspect of the children's performances, from their enunciation to their motivations.

"The comic timing of it the first time was perfect," said Thornton to Mason Kazer, 10, and Katie Marks, 13, about a section of the dance where Marks pulls the scene-stealing Kazer off center stage.

"You know what you're thinking? You're thinking, 'I look slick,' " Thornton explained to Kazer. "OK, let's try it again."

Jones and Thornton's strategy has been to treat the young actors as much like adults as possible.

"They're really uninhibited," said Thornton, who has taught acting classes for children at Sandymount Elementary School. "People say don't expect too much from them, but I don't think that's true."

Jones is used to expecting a lot from her performers.

"The trick is having very high expectations and then raising the bar," said Jones.

Since rehearsals started Jones has seen a lot of improvement.

"I've heard their voices improve, their diction, their self-confidence, their ability to project both emotionally and vocally," said Jones.

Jones hopes that, for some of the children, this production might be the first step toward a longer career in the arts.

"The other day, the boy who plays Johnny said, 'I loved having an audience,' " recounted Jones, "and I thought, 'Hot dang, it's going to be good.' "

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