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## Souhegan Valley teens at work on original musical

By SANDI DEI DOLORI, Correspondent

MILFORD – Rodgers and Hammerstein . . . Lerner and Loewe . . . Cass and Harris? If Toby Tarnow has her way, these two students involved in writing and composing a full-length musical for the Riverbend Youth Company will rank right up there with the great musical theater collaborators.

Tarnow calls herself a “shepherd.” In her job as artistic director of the school of theater arts at the Boys & Girls Club of Souhegan Valley, she is the mama bear behind the students involved in writing, acting and composing their plays.

“I try to make sure they are communicating what they want in their works,” she said. She is passionate about her students, their plays and their future. She calls the collaborative efforts of Andrew Cass and Joseph Harris on their show – titled “My Play – A Musical” – an “inspired production that just took off, one of the most exciting things I have ever been involved with.”

And she needs an underwriter.

Cass, 17, is a playwright and an actor from Mont Vernon. A whirling dervish of creative energy, he won the Best Supporting Actor in a Play at the 2008 New Hampshire Theater awards earlier this year. The “short” version of Cass’ self-labeled “meta-musical” was produced in February as one of the One Act Play contest winners in the Riverbend Youth Company theater program at the Amato Center in Milford.

“My Play – A Musical” is about a student who wants to write a musical – and the relationships and conflicts that occur within that process. The play concludes with him entering the One Act Play contest. (No spoilers here: You’ll have to see it to find out if he wins.)

Cass’ play was based on a song he had written in a “fit of inspiration.” The song, “The World can be a Musical,” is a dialogue between a music theory teacher and a student, and was the motivation behind writing the show.

When he presented his draft to Tarnow, she thought it was amazing.

Cass had written lyrics and had melodies in his head, but no compositions. They needed to find a composer and, as Tarnow said, they gratefully found Harris, a 17-year-old Milford native.

Cass and Harris spoke and decided to collaborate. This effort, Harris says, was very “free-form.”

"We had only five weeks; we sat at the piano and just played stuff to see what worked, what inspiration came."

At least once a week the pair would sit and begin the back-and-forth process of composing a musical. Cass loved the creative give and take because it offered him a "fresh perspective" on the ideas he had formulated.

A natural born director, Cass said collaborating with Harris, the choreographer, the actors and producers was his favorite part. A natural born writer, seeing his creations changed and edited was the worst.

Harris loves the final performance, hearing what happens to his music when someone else interprets it.

They wrote a song a week for five weeks, and although there were originally more than a dozen songs in the full-length version of the play,

Tarnow convinced them to shorten it for the contest. Hopefully, she said, they would work very hard to have the play performed in the future, in the original – and still being written – full-length version.

Enter the need for an underwriter.

The full-length version of "My Play-A Musical" is being considered as Riverbend's fall production at the Amato Center. As Tarnow wistfully expresses, they need an angel. An angel to underwrite the play for the Boys & Girls Club of the Souhegan Valley so that they don't have to worry about losing money on the cost of the production.

The club runs on grants and donations – the main stage shows need to generate a certain amount of money to keep the theater going. The concern is whether an unknown play can draw the attendance and income required.

It's a double-edged sword. The club is lucky enough to have a very unique theater program – it's the only club in New England with a performing arts center and an actual professional theater attached to it. In order to keep the program going, Tarnow said Riverbend must perform well-known plays, such as "Carousel" and the current "Once Upon a Mattress." But the heart of the club's Riverbend Youth Company theater program is to exposing young people to theater.

Cut to Cass and Harris.

Finding an underwriter to fund the process of Cass and Harris finishing the music and script and ensuring that the budget for the theater will be covered is Tarnow's mission. For her, the opportunity for these young people and the community to have it's own original musical written by locals, is just the "most amazing thing imaginable."

"Andrew's pain," Tarnow says, "that I felt, when saying 'Andrew, we have to cut this', and promising him that we'd be able to put it back at some time. that's why I want to go out and beat the bushes to get this done!"

One thing is for certain regarding the future of "My Play-A Musical": It will be finished. The complete version will hopefully, be a "nice two-hour show with two acts," says Cass. He is writing up to 15 more songs with Harris and finishing the script.

Harris, an all-state singer for three years, is going to Europe this summer to tour with the Sound of America chorus.

Cass' goal is to continue writing and acting, to "find the thing for me that fits." He'll go to college, hopefully to study an arts-related major – theater, acting or comedy.

For more information about the Riverbend Youth Company, call Susan at 672-1002, Ext. 15.

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