

THEATER

Actress, 10, works at miracle

Meadow Brook Theatre presents *The Miracle Worker*, through Sunday, Nov. 15, at the theater on the campus of Oakland University, Rochester. Preview 8 p.m. Thursday-Friday, Oct. 22-23, opens 6 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 24. Tickets \$24-\$36. Performances Tuesday-Sunday, call (248) 377-3300 for show times and ticket information.

By KEELY WYONIK
STAFF WRITER
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With her upbeat, positive, can-do attitude, Stacie Guerreso of Farmington Hills sounds a lot older than 10. She's making her Meadow Brook Theatre debut this week as Helen Keller in William Gibson's classic play, *The Miracle Worker*.

"It's fun, but tough in a way," said Guerreso about the challenging role, often played by somewhat older actresses. "I'm lucky. God gave me the gift to see, hear, talk and share my talent with everyone."

She's been performing since she was 3. Her mom, Karen, remembers driving in the car with Stacie in the back seat.

"She was singing in the car, and really belted out a song. We couldn't believe it and invited family and friends over to hear her sing."

Stacie remembers it well. "We dropped my sister Melissa off, and Whitney Houston was singing my favorite song, 'I'll Always Love You' and I said to myself, 'I've just got to do this. I belted it out, and my parents said 'what was that?'"

Guerreso's parents entered Stacie in a couple of local talent competitions. "She showed no signs of stage fright," remembers Karen. Impressed with Stacie's talent, her parents hired Debbie Frederick Ackerman to be her vocal teacher.

Ackerman, who has worked with Stacie for the last two years, got her involved in children's theater at Marquis Theatre in Northville.

"She's so easy to teach," said Ackerman. "Her first part was a bit part in 'Aladdin.' She said, 'you know Miss Debbie, I know I only got a bit part, but I will be so good in this bit part that they won't be able to overlook me next time.'" Later, Stacie was cast as

Fern, a lead role in "Charlotte's Web." She recently won a national vocal talent competition in New York City.

"I just believe in her so much, she has the most amazing attitude, and has been able to rise above a lot of obstacles," said Ackerman. "Stacie is going to be great, she has such a great attitude."

With her mom making sure she eats and gets enough sleep, Stacie has thrown herself into the grueling schedule "The Miracle Worker" demands. She goes to school all day, then to rehearsal.

Set in the 1800s, the "Miracle Worker" is the story of Helen's journey out of darkness and silence. Born deaf and blind in the 1800s, Helen's parents, determined to learn how to communicate with their daughter, hire Annie Sullivan, (portrayed by New York-based actress Lauren Dowden) to be her teacher.

In those days, children like Helen were often institutionalized. Helen resists Annie's attempts, but Annie whose experience with near-blindness gives her a special understanding of Helen's plight doesn't give up.

"They put blindfolds on, and gave me earplugs so I could feel what it was like not to be able to see or hear," said Guerreso. "I'd walk around the stage and university with them on, of course I always had someone with me so I wouldn't hurt myself."

As it got closer to the opening curtain for previews, which began Wednesday, the blindfold and earplugs were removed, and Guerreso was on her own.

"Sometimes I'd go back to being Stacie," she said. "I'd sit in my dressing room and think about it."

Occasionally, someone would ask, "do we need to get the blindfold?" Guerreso would answer "if that's what it takes," giggling at the memory.

The light scenes between her and Dowden, who as Annie works persistently to tame the disruptive and at times uncontrollable, Helen, were "rough," said Guerreso.

"It's weird to be actually fighting with someone, because I don't like to hurt anyone," she said. "Lauren makes it a lot easier. She's great. I think it was more difficult for her than it was for me because I have to really struggle."

Dowden has enjoyed working with Stacie. "She's just great, she's very mature for her age, and a joy to work with."

About those difficult fight scenes, "She's the instigator," said Dowden. "She jokes 'I don't have any lines,' but her actions are a cue for my lines, so she has to know the lines. Everything is choreographed, once you know the dance, you can have fun and let it go. It's trusting. She helps me a lot, it's give and take."



Classic: Stacie Guerreso (Helen Keller) and Lauren Dowden (Annie Sullivan) in Meadow Brook Theatre's production of William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*.

Hilberry's 'Hamlet' a riveting production

By SUE SUCINTA
SPECIAL WRITER

Wayne State University's graduate theater company performs Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in rotating repertory through Jan. 22 at the Hilberry Theatre on the campus at Cass and Hancock, Detroit. For tickets, call (313) 577-2972, or for more information visit the Web site at www.com.wayne.edu/theatre/.

Shakespeare's classic tragedy "Hamlet," a favorite of theater audiences and actors alike, is a must-see production in the hands of Hilberry's talented company. From the focused intensity of David Engelman's riveting performance of Hamlet, through the haunting poignancy of Ophelia's descent into madness, to the intense ending, the Hilberry company captured the personal intensity of the drama.

"Hamlet" is a story of revenge and regret, intense love and bitter enmity. Shortly after the death of his father, Hamlet's mother marries Claudius, her late husband's brother. Angered and despondent over the incestuous union but without focus, Hamlet's anger is swiftly channeled into a passionate desire for revenge when Hamlet's father's ghost, now suffering in purgatory, reveals that he was murdered by Claudius. Hamlet's personal battle with his conscience ignites the subsequent events and tragedy that befall the court at

Elsinore.

By focusing on the human side of the drama and not the quasi-historical backdrop, the Hilberry company captures the timelessness of the tragedy. The trapings of war were modern, from military fatigues to automatic weapons, vivid reminders of the modern world's violence. Yet despite the modern costumes, the cast delivered some of the greatest lines ever penned by the immortal Bard with intensity, skill and clarity, making the beautiful Shakespearean dialogue easy to follow.

David Engelman is outstanding as Hamlet. He delivers his soliloquies with a refreshingly natural feel, building a complex character capable of the sudden swings between rash anger and calm, deliberate clarity. Engelman's Hamlet is his own and he brings a fresh interpretation to the delivery of his lines, which make his vulnerable love for Ophelia become a real, Engelman's powerful confrontation scene with Hamlet's mother further demonstrated Engelman's ability to take his Hamlet to the brink of rage and then back to the quiet cunning man with a mission of calculated revenge.

Sara Wolf powerfully captured Ophelia's descent into madness by letting us see Ophelia's attempt to keep her fragile grasp on reality, yet finally succumbing as her heartbreaks become more than she can bear.

Matt Troyer lent a young, vir-

ile image to Claudius, a role often played as much older. He created a cunning foe for Hamlet. Gavin Lewis as Horatio created a strong chemistry with Hamlet as his closest friend and trusted confidant.

Heidi Olson's Gertrude was a third world Lady Di, seemingly too young to be the mother of a young man. She also lacked the instincts and presence of a strong queen mother in her scenes with Hamlet. She acted more like a sister being chastised.

The mood music was a mixed bag: distracting during some scenes, mood enhancing during others. And despite the strong imagery of the ghost, the voice of Darrth Vader's as it electronically echoed through the theater. The stark set, with violently scattered monument

stones and chain link enclosures, created an uneasy, post-revolutionary setting, intensifying the aura of political intrigue.

The entire cast captured the essence of Hamlet, drawing out its timeless lessons while delivering Shakespeare's immortal verse with the richness of interpretation it so fully deserves. The production literally flew by and left one with a deeply satisfying theater experience.

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