

Local actors star in Bright Star Theatre's 'Shake With a Zombie'



Kathleen Dreger sings with the cast.

Matt Yan, Editor

3:24 pm CDT April 11, 2017

"It's the place to go, the place to be," declares the opening chorus of Bright Star Theatre's latest production.

The singers — special-needs students and their volunteer companions — are referring to Pat's Luncheonette, the setting of the musical comedy "Shake With A Zombie," but they could just as easily be singing about the theater itself.

Devoted teenagers spent one day a week from September to April rehearsing for the show with their actor counterparts, who are in their teens to early 20s and have special needs. They held live performances Saturday-Sunday, April 8-9, at the Northbrook Theatre.

Director Julie Gibson Lay is in her third year with the program.

"This year what's just blown me away is the buddies," she said, referring to the volunteers, who designed the artwork, choreography and costumes.

"Shake With A Zombie" centers on Pat's Luncheonette as Molo, a rock-eating creature from below the earth, arrives with intentions of taking over the world. To do this, Molo turns everyone into zombies and forces them to read books so she can steal information.

Glenview's Katie McManus, wearing a pair of goofy alien eyes atop her head, plays the antagonist Molo. She brings a flamboyance and lively energy to her role, waving her arms in dramatic flourishes during dance numbers. As she transforms people into zombies, they each gain the alien eyes on their heads.

McManus was assisted by Marlee Fradin, a Deerfield teen. The two didn't know each other before rehearsals began. "It was really fun to get to know [Katie], and I think we're great friends now," Fradin said.

Highland Park's Sammie Metz is Marlene, one of the several high-schoolers at Pat's who has to contend with Molo. She said she enjoyed working with companion Pennie Lome, who helped her recall her lines.

The feeling is mutual, Lome said.

"It's just wonderful to develop a really close relationship," she said.

Lome, of Northbrook, began volunteering with Bright Star three years ago after she saw how much a friend was enjoying working with students. The Maple eighth-grader hopes to one day become a special education teacher or work with special-needs students in some capacity.

With a group of 10 participants with varying needs, Gibson wasn't aiming for perfection. She assigned roles according to ability, but that would still allow actors to get out of their comfort zone.

"Going in the biggest challenge is just getting the kids to loosen up," Gibson said. "For me, a show like this, there's not really mistakes, not really right and wrong answers. If they go up there and look like they're having fun and they're moving around, that's what they're supposed to do."

She hopes the actors also take home some everyday skills that will benefit them in the long run.

"To me, theater is learning how to be up on a stage or be in front of a crowd ... or how to be composed," Gibson added. "You can't really be anxious and worried about other things that are going on in your life."

Bright Star is a drama program produced by the Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association. For more information visit www.nssra.org.