

By **Kristi Funderburk**

By **Staff Reporter**

Posted Mar 17, 2016 at 11:30 AM

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More than 50 seventh- and eighth-graders, most donning patch dresses or suspenders and floppy hats, are ready to entertain all ages in this musical comedy. With two young family members falling in love with a member of the rival clan, the cast calls it Romeo and Juliet of the hills.

“It’s controversial because we’re not supposed to be seen together,” said Connor Rosen, whose character, Lee Roy Calhoun, falls in love with Emmy Lou Tolliver. “It’s really interesting you get to make the change between the families.”

Iycis Dozier, who plays his sweetheart, Emmy Lou, didn’t initially like her part, but it grew on her in rehearsal.

“It was really awkward at first,” she said. “I had to act in love with someone who’s a complete stranger, but after awhile, I started to like it a lot more.”

Director Jennifer Mundt said the show, her 24th for Gates Intermediate School, offered a prime opportunity for the students. It has several roles and the lines were spread out to make it more of an ensemble cast.

Mundt has come to enjoy the music, too.

“It’s a lot of fun. The kids are really enjoying it,” she said.

With interesting characters and funny lines, “Hillbilly Hayride” appeals to a wide audience, she said.

“I know they’re going to laugh. It’s really funny,” Mundt said. “There’s something for kids to adults.”

Victoria McCallion is playing Maw Tolliver, the grouchy leader of one of the two hillbilly clans.

“She has a lot of hatred toward the other clan. There’s this feud that’s been going on like 200 years,” Victoria said.

She enjoys the unique part.

“I think she’s really, really fun to play. There’s a different side to her.”

Her arch nemesis, Paw Calhoun, is a role Darien Heggie owns in his gray scraggly beard and bullet-lined sash.

“I think he is just an amazing role,” he said. “He goes insane a lot, which I love dearly.”

When someone says hillbilly, Darien warns, only a name can calm him—Shirley Temple.

Other than the character, he thinks the audience will love the show for the shootouts, fighting and the feud.

Aurora Brown, Faith Ryan, Maggie Blake and Addison Loverin play the Tolliver daughters.

“They’re very interesting,” said Faith, who plays Lucinda in the show.

Those odd characters make for an interesting play, too, said Addison, who plays Opal.

“It has a lot of twists,” Faith said, trying to stay mum on any spoilers. “There’s action and romance.”

And Maggie, who plays Petunia, added, “It’s hilarious.”

“Sometimes it’s hard for us not to laugh at it,” Addison said.

But the students are serious about their craft, and welcomed the community to buy a ticket.

“We worked really hard on this,” said Aurora, who plays Dulcy and hopes to be an actress and a marine biologist someday.

Tucker Steverman, Owen Swift, and Jacob Frasu are among the Calhoun clan, as Clyde, Goober and Bubba, respectively.

“I think it’s super, duper awesome,” Tucker said of the show. “It’s really fun and I have a cool costume.”

The scene built on the stage is pretty authentic, too, Jacob said.

“One of my favorite parts is the set,” he said.

Between running lines on the stage, Owen said he’s enjoyed getting to know the characters of both clans.

“I think it’s really cool.”

Among the students-turned-hillbillies, two characters in business attire stand out. Declan Madan, as Joe Martin, and Aurora Avallone, as Sally Merriwether, play employees from publishing companies trying to get the families to turn their story into a novel.

“The best thing is I don’t have to have a hillbilly accent,” Declan said. “I can’t do accents.”

Aurora likes skipping the accent and getting a costume that is so normal it’s unique.

“I think it’s fun because I’m able to try out a role most people don’t have,” she said. “It sort of helps; being an actor, you have to understand your role and get to know your character. It’s been fun.”

Curtains open at 7 p.m. Friday, March 18 and Saturday, March 19 at Scituate High School. Admission is \$6 for children and students and \$8 for adults.

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