

Setting the Stage: SSISD drama students presenting 'Dracula: The Vampire Play' for UIL competition

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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Josh Bain (Dracula) and Blaine Surber (Professor Van Helsing, seated) watch as Sulphur Springs High School drama teacher Dawn Doyle arranges a miniature "unit set" of "Dracula," which they will perform at 7 p.m. Saturday, March 26, at the Civic Center and then again in UIL One-Act Play competition at Texas High School in Texarkana on Thursday, March 31. Also pictured are (center to right) Kayla Hiller, Kristin Ramsey, Lexi McCaig and Skyler Sinclair (Mina). Staff Photo by Luis Noble

Sulphur Springs High School drama teacher Dawn Doyle started thinking about next week's UIL One-Act Play contest last fall. She wanted something "sensational and more competitive."

"We've done comedy for so many years," Doyle said during an interview in her classroom earlier this week. "I wanted to do something tragic, but not Greek or Shakespeare."

So Doyle picked Tim Kelly's "Dracula: The Vampire Play," which is billed by I.E. Clark Publications as "dramatized from the Bram Stoker novel." In addition to being a classic, Doyle believes the phenomenal popularity of Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" series makes the play more current.

"Dracula and his wives do not win out in the end," she explained. "The cross is presented to the vampires and it drives them away because they're unholy. We're not sensationalizing the occult. We're focusing on the storyline behind all the Dracula folklore."

Doyle is relying on "beautiful costuming" by Rose Costumes of Denton, a creative stage set and excellent acting by her students to put them on the top of the UIL district competition set for

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Thursday, March 31, at Texarkana's Texas High.

"There are seven schools in our district," she said. "There's Texas High, Mount Pleasant, Royse City, Greenville, Dennison, Sherman and us."

Each school must present a play within strict guidelines.

"It can run no longer than 40 minutes, max," Doyle explained. "Ours runs 38:30, which is perfect. If you go overtime, you are automatically disqualified. Not only do you not advance, you're not eligible for any awards."

Honors include best actor, best actress, a technical award, eight all-star cast awards and eight for honorable mention.

"With seven schools averaging about 15 students each in a cast, that's 105 kids to share nine awards."

There are time constraints on the crew, too.

"We have seven minutes to set up and seven minutes to strike the set," she said. "It takes us five and a half minutes, so we have about one and one half minutes to kill."

When the contest manager says "You may begin," the actors have one minute to start the play.

"Two schools advance," she explained. "It's all in the hands of Royal Brantley, regents professor of theater at West Texas A&M."

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There are strict rules for staging a play for UIL competition. There is a standardized set, called the "unit set," that every school in the state uses. The kit contains a specific number of ramps, pylons, platforms and flats that can be configured in numerous ways, as long as the set falls within specific guidelines.

"There is a thick rule book with things you can and cannot do," Doyle explained as she placed miniature blocks on a table. "We have a really nice set for 'Dracula.'"

In deciding which actors to use, Doyle uses a tried and true formula.

"When I get ready to cast a play, I ask, 'Who can I rely on? Who is really good? Who has the experience?'" she said. "I cast it before Christmas, but we didn't start rehearsal until after we got back from the holidays."

Once the students get down to work, they do read-throughs, focus on character development and block out the action on the stage at the Civic Center. They gave up their spring break to rehearse.

Doyle cast the two lead characters, seniors Josh Bain (Dracula) and Blaine Surber (Professor Van Helsing), because of their experience.

"These guys have grown so much," she explained. "They've been in almost every show since they were freshmen."

The students are happy to go the extra mile for Doyle.

"Her dedication is like a give and take," said Bain, the 17-year-old son of Noel and Tammy Bain. "The dedication she has makes us want to do more."

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"She doesn't treat us like we're high school theater students," said Surber, the 18-year-old son of Marty and Mary Surber. "She expects a high quality."

SSHS Director of Fine Arts Charles McCauley says Doyle's expectations are an integral part of her success.

"She does expect a lot of them," he said. "I enjoy watching her teach and coach. She's outstanding at finding talent in a kid. She's tough, but she's fair."

McCauley also appreciates the dedication Doyle and her students exhibit for each production.

"They work incredibly hard," he explained. "They work long hours. Hopefully, at the end of the show, the students can discover a part of themselves they didn't know they had."

To prepare for the part of the villain, Bain dyed his hair black, but thinks his stature is also a factor in getting him into the mind of an ancient character like Dracula.

"I'm almost a foot taller than everyone else, so that helps," said Bain, who hopes to study drafting in college while continuing to act. "But, there's more to it than that. I've never really played an evil character. Take the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. There's the good doctor that's the good side and there's Mr. Hyde that's the evil side. In this play, there's Mr. Hyde, the dark side, and then there's something more evil than Mr. Hyde. There's a darker side that no one really knows."

Surber, who is a bundle of kinetic energy, said he has a different approach to get into character. He is, after all, the one who is going to destroy the monster.

"The others [characters] have a mindset that this is not real ... that it's a dream," Surber, who plans to major in theater, explained. "I have to convince them it's real. I'm the one who brings it [Dracula] into focus. Once I convince them that Dracula's real, then I have to kill him."

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Doyle and her cast create a T-shirt for every production.

For "Dracula," the T-shirt's inscription says: *The vampire's strength lies in the fact that so few believe in its existence.*

Surber's character believes in Dracula, and therefore finds the confidence necessary to confront the evil.

"Yes, my character is afraid," Surber said, "but I have the power [of the cross] to destroy him."

Doyle adds, "Evil does not win in this play."

The SSSHS Drama Department will present "Dracula" at the Hopkins County Regional Civic Center at 7 p.m. Saturday, March 26. Admission is free.