



Ragout Reflections



Plenty of life lessons can be gleaned from children's play

By Shane Bridges

On Friday and Saturday night, March 30 and 31, the Young Rivertime Players entertained nearly 200 guests with our production of "Emma Lou and the Big Ragout." Len Holmes wrote a lovely preview of the show last week, so I'm going to give you a behind-the-scenes account of all that happened leading up to the big show.

We held auditions in February and were thrilled with the turnout. Part of the reason we chose "Ragout" was that it provided us great flexibility in casting the show. Not knowing how many might want to take part, "Ragout" allowed us to have actors play multiple roles if need be, but also gave us the freedom to accommodate more actors than were actually called for in the script. We ended up adding several roles, and ultimately had 19 in the cast. And what a group that 19 was!

Brett Jordan and Keisha Lyles were cast as King and Queen Shankpump. It's so rewarding for me, as a director, to see growth in young actors. I first worked with these two in last year's production of *Aladdin*, and the change I've seen in them has been immense. They have great chemistry together, and I once directed Keisha to smack Bret before rehearsal, so they would be warmed up for the show.

Their interplay in the first act was a joy to behold. Some of the biggest laughs we had in rehearsals was at their expense.

Briley Lee played the title role of Emma Lou. Young Ms. Lee impressed me in the auditions with her engaging smile and infectious enthusiasm. The character of Emma Lou was terribly challenging to play, as she was the one that went through the most change in the course of the story. Briley did not disappoint!

Hannah Mills portrayed Glorious Lavoone, the charm school director, in our show. It took me about five seconds in the audition to realize we had a special talent when I heard Ms. Mills read. She is a gifted young actress, and a joy to work with! She quickly synthesized and produced anything I asked her to play, which, as a director, is a dream come true. She also collaborated with me on the song "Big Ragout on the King's Decree," and impressed me with her singing ability. Her talent is prodigious!

Andrew Lawlor did a great job in the role of Bucky Grodle-

bucket! Andrew is a bundle of ideas and energy, and the thing about him is that once an idea hits his head, it is immediately transmitted to his lips. There was some trepidation that we might not be able to install a disconnect between his mind and mouth once we got on stage in front of a live audience, but I had confidence, and it was well placed, as young Mr. Lawlor performed his role flawlessly!

The "Slimes" were played by Jenni Turner, Cole Powers, and Amber and Jake Lyles. Ms. Turner is a stage veteran who added so much to our show. In addition to her great Slime portrayal, Jenni also choreographed the "Physical" dance number, and designed and implemented the Slime makeup. And she did all this while rehearsing and acting in two other shows at the same time! Stretched to the limit, she performed marvelously.

Cole Powers is one of those actors that you don't have to push much. You give him a nudge in the direction you want him to go, and before you know it, you're having to chase him down! His slime character was hilarious and ever-changing, and he made me laugh 'til my belly hurt.

This was the first show in which I have had the opportunity to work with Amber and Jake Lyles, and I am so proud of them. Jake's reputation preceded him, as I had heard that during the Young Rivertime Player's production of "School Daze" in 2010, he learned not only his lines, but the lines for everyone else too. Amber Lyles was a little reluctant to audition for this year's show, and started out a little shy, but she really came out of her shell by the time the show opened. Both of the little Lyles (with gentle prodding from their oh so supportive parents) gave wonderful performances.

The "Ragbottoms" consisted of Victor and Jerry Evans, Madison Davis, Natalie Brooks, and Stetson Copous. I feel very blessed to have had Victor and Jerry in our show. These two sat in the first row for every performance of our Toby show last fall. For "Ragout," they were always the first to rehearsal (Victor beat me there every day) and they blew up my Facebook inbox and phone with messages and texts during the process. In fact, they still are doing that! Everyone in the cast should take example of the Evans

brothers' willingness to do whatever it takes to be a part of the show, and go the extra mile to make sure they succeed.

Madison Davis was a bright spot in my day every time I saw her. Upon seeing me, she would immediately give me a rundown of her fashionable ensemble that day, and update me on any injuries she may have sustained since I last saw her. Trying to get this sweet little girl to be a mean Ragbottom was one of my biggest challenges in the show, and Ms. Davis pulled it off wonderfully.

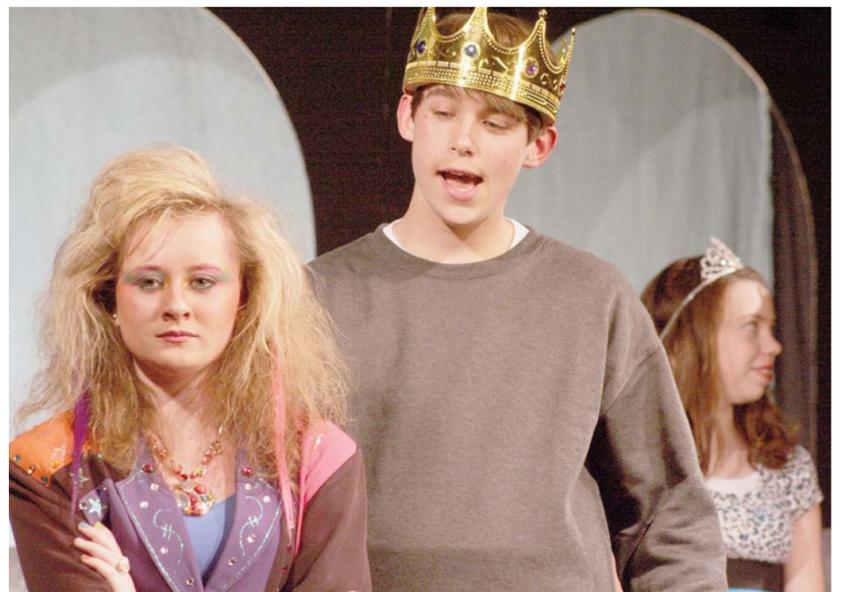
Natalie Brooks was in our production of *Aladdin* last year, and she's another shining example of how much our young troop has grown in their stage abilities. Watching our Rivertime Players promotional video that was playing in the lobby pre-show really sent that message home. She did a great job, and I'm very proud of her.

Stetson Copous is new to our troop this year, and she was born to be on the stage. She has a natural sense of timing and inflection which made her particular Ragbottom particularly hilarious. Ms. Copous was great!

Ryleigh Beecham, Madison Cagle, Molly Lawlor and Haylee Duncan portrayed the "Witches." Ms. Duncan as the "Harpo" of the "Groucho" clan of Witches, is as cute as a button little doll who danced marvelously, and played a mean bike horn! She's a joy!

I have a hard time separating Ryleigh, Madison, and Molly in my description of their performances. They truly embodied the term "ensemble acting." It was commonplace for these three young gifted actresses to come up to me during rehearsal and inform me that they would be out in the hall working on their scene if I needed them. Every day they would improve on and perfect their performances, which is a director's dream! The end result was the creepiest, most hilarious coven of witches this side of "Macbeth," and I can take no credit for their performance, as they directed themselves!

And, finally, the role of "the Big Ragout," as well as "Mr. Parthelbump" was played by Hunter Jordan. Mr. Jordan played the lead in last year's production of *Aladdin*, and was also in *Broke with the Wind* last October. I have asked Mr. Jordan to do some pretty ridiculous things in the short time that I've known him, but none more



Hannah Mills as Glorious Lavoone, Brett Jordan as King Shankpump and Briley Lee as Emma Lou all gave stellar performances last weekend in the original play *Emma Lou and the Big Ragout*.

ridiculous than those that I asked of him in this show. As usual, Hunter exceeded my expectations. If you ever need to learn how to act with a your face completely covered, wearing a pair of football shoulder pads, holding two sticks and carrying a 10 pound ball of clay and hair on your head, Mr. Hunter Jordan can teach you how to do it! I could not be more proud of him and our entire cast!

Being in a play is a lot like playing on a baseball team. It takes lots of practice, and it's a big commitment. When a short-stop can't be at practice, someone has to take his/her place. If a coach steps in for the missing player, the team may have trouble getting anyone on base that day. If a reserve catcher steps in, it may take a mercy rule to change sides. Either way, it greatly changes practice dynamics and hinders the growth of the team. Rehearsing a play is much the same. Attendance is something we give great weight to when casting our productions. I would like to thank all the young people and parents who followed through with that commitment.

I would also like to thank our production crew. First and foremost, Mr. Mark Tubbs. Mr. Tubbs has three qualities that make him special: ambition, drive, and talent. Having only one of those three traits will get you nowhere. Having two of the three gives you a good fighting

chance. If you have all three, you can't lose! Thank you, Mark, for being my best bud!

Elicia Spain was the only one who showed up for auditions when I came down to cast our first Toby Show in 2006, and I can't run her off to save my life! She managed to juggle a million show responsibilities with her multiple jobs, and we couldn't do the show without her. My wish for everyone reading this is that Mrs. Spain never has to do your makeup!

I'd also like to thank Mrs. Sue Tubbs (and wish her a Happy Birthday) for making the Ragout robe, Susy Jordan for filling up our program with sponsors, Judy King for writing the ABC grant, Judy Daugherty for everything, Mayor Boaz for continually supporting the arts, Justin Flanigan for doing sound, and Tonja Hendrix for making that popcorn like no one else can! And of course my friend Wayne Lyles and the Street Department for all the work they do for pizza and donuts. I know I'm leaving people out, but there's really no way to thank everyone, and I've got to leave room in the paper for the Boaz Naked Furniture and Used Tire Emporium flyers.

After we closed the show on Saturday, I started thinking about "Emma Lou and the Big Ragout."

What's it really about? My description of the show, when-

ever anyone would ask, was always "It's sort of a twisted Wizard of Oz tale." I've discovered that it's more than that. Here we have the tale of Emma Lou, rejected for no discernible reason by Bucky. She decides that she has to change herself in some way in order to make him like her, so she goes on a quest. The Slimes tell her that to be cool, you have to walk a certain way, so she does. The Ragbottoms tell her that to be cool, you have to dress a certain way, so she does. The Witches tell her that to be cool, you have to look a certain way, so she does. By the end of her quest, Emma Lou has gone to such great lengths to be cool, that she's become a clown. All this to find out that Bucky liked her all along, but was afraid to communicate it due to his own shyness.

Likewise, the Big Ragout, ostracized because of his appearance, withdrew from civilization and became mean. He became a bully as a defense mechanism. Only when Glorious called him out on it, and treated him as he had treated others, did he drop the facade, expose his soul to her, and communicate.

You don't have to walk, act, or dress a certain way to be cool. Communicate. You don't have to be a big bully. Communicate. Get to know one another. Understand and respect people's differences. It takes all kinds.

