

# Naples teen theater virtual, distanced — and hard work



Students with the STAR Academy practice singing for the upcoming musical *The Addams Family*, Monday, July 6 at the Gulfshore Playhouse in Naples.

JON AUSTRIA/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

Harriet Howard Heithaus Naples Daily News | USA TODAY NETWORK — FLORIDA

In a summertime of coronavirus restrictions, when there are few opportunities for teens, two productions feature them in a very different approach to theater.

## Gulfshore teens visit 'The Addams Family' live

On the first day of rehearsal for "The Addams Family" musical, administrators at the [Gulfshore Playhouse](#) Star Academy were doing

what one would expect in the era of coronavirus restrictions: keeping teens apart.

Steven Calakos, new education director for Gulfshore Playhouse, had taken "Social distance, everybody! Remember you need to be six feet apart," as his mantra for the outdoor lunch hour, as kids nested on the amphitheater stage attached to the Norris Community Center.

Back doors were open and fans sucked fresh air into the theater.

They will do that in every rehearsal room while the teens create their production of "The Addams Family" musical July 30 through Aug 8. (See information box for details.)

The cast and crew had already jumped two hurdles. One was bringing in parents for a 9 a.m. meeting to explain that these students needed to stay distant from potential sources of COVID-19 infection.

"We explained that essentially this is their job for the next four

weeks," said Jeffrey Binder, associate artistic director. "They need to protect themselves for it."

The second challenge was working through the first morning of rehearsal when a rainstorm took away all their outdoor venues. Generally the students will cycle through a series of rooms, like changing classes in high school, to keep the 17 actors in small groups. From the amphitheater stage to a lunchroom to the auditorium to the center's roughly 15 by

## 'The Addams Family'

**What:** Musical version of the comic gothic family that inspired a TV series and several movies performed by Gulfshore Playhouse Star Academy teens

**Where:** Norris Community Center, 755 Eighth Ave. S., Naples

**When:** 7:30 p.m. July 30-Aug. 1 and Aug. 5-8; 2 p.m. matinee Aug. 7

**Tickets:** \$20, [gulfshoreplayhouse.org](http://gulfshoreplayhouse.org) or 239-354-7955 (open web browser required)

27-foot dance studio, it's all arranged to enable social distances.

This production has a model: The Seoul, Korea, production of "Phantom of the Opera," which has been running continuously through the crisis with precautions so strict the audience is misted down with disinfectant, given temperature checks and fill out a questionnaire for potential contract tracing.

But the Seoul production uses the entire theater except for several rows within breathing distance of the cast; Gulfshore Playhouse is spacing its seating. Its 200-seat venue will only hold 85 people for each performance. Masks will be required.

On Monday, teens ready to sing were in the theater, looking like a welding class in face shields handed out to them. They will not wear them for the production, but until then, each student uses one daily and turns it in at night for the staff to completely sanitize. Each day they have a temperature check on arrival.

Accidents can happen. Even the "Phantom" production in Seoul had to be shut down for three weeks when a dancer learned she had tested positive for coronavirus. But the sanitation had been so strict, its staff reported, that no one else tested positive after the isolation.

What would happen here? "If a cast member tests positive we shut down for at least three days to thoroughly sanitize the theater," Calakos said. He stopped short of saying that could mean a two-week delay, but suggested the rest of the cast may need to be tested before they can resume.



The stars of KidzAct Teens "Pride & Prejudice," left, the smug suitor, Bingley (Landon Libby), the frustrating Darcy (Dominic Young) and Lizzy (Olivia Petersen) who will choose between them. JESSICA WALCK/NAPLES PLAYERS

The play promises at least four generations' worth of entertainment. Gen-Xers probably had their first encounter with the lovably spooky family in the Anjelica Huston-Raul Julia films in 1991 and '93. Baby boomers will remember the long-running TV show from 1964. Even the generation before that may remember its foundation as a regular series of Charles Addams cartoons in *The New Yorker* magazine that began in 1938.

This generation could take its cues from watching the 1998 Tim Curry-Darryl Hannah video film with their parents. But the musical is what they're familiar with, Binder said. Its clutch of infectious songs — and, yes, it includes the familiar original TV theme — speaks to teens.

"They're a loving family, and they're passionate about it. But they're not your typical family," he said. "They sort of embrace their differences, and teens relate to that — that it's OK to be yourself."

## KidzAct Teens tease Jane Austen in virtual romp

KidzAct Teens in Kate Hamill's outre sendup of the Jane Austen classic, "Pride and Prejudice" were less than pleased to learn their summer show would be staged online.

Jessica Walck, associate artistic



Jeff Binder, associate artistic director at the Gulfshore Playhouse and director of STAR Academy's upcoming musical *Addams Family*, explains how students will practice their dancing using proper distancing, Monday, July 6 at the Gulfshore Playhouse in Naples.

JON AUSTRIA/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

director of Naples Players, remembers their reaction when she told them the play would be recorded for a Zoom performance (through Saturday, June 11).

"They were like 'We're theater actors. We want to do theater. We're not movie actors,'" recalled Walck. "I had to tell them, 'Let's not protect careers we don't have.'"

Eventually the teens, who had already begun rehearsing the comedy when coronavirus restrictions closed Sugden Community Theatre, came around. But not without a lot of new thinking about the play they had already rehearsed for Sugden Community Theatre.

"There's a lot of physical comedy. The whole show was basically first performed and written to happen all at once, with all the actors are on-stage. The transitions happen very quickly, and everything's very physical."

This is not the heart-melting "Pride and Prejudice" of your teen reading years. Hamill has ratcheted up the characters' quirks in Jane Austen's classic. She's also added zany dialogue to her contemporary version of the marriageable, yet unmarriageable, Bennet sisters. Chief among them is Lizzie (Elizabeth for you Austen purists), who sees marriage as an albatross and the men proposing it as substandard.

That goes in spades for the disagreeable Fitzwilliam Darcy. But there's something about him, and the two finally bond, amidst a flurry of snappy patter, comic familial machinations and — blue face paint? Not much is sacred here.

Its physical storytelling is precisely why it was chosen, Walck said. It's meant to educate the students on

## Kate Hamill's 'Pride and Prejudice'

**What:** KidzAct Teen farce on the famous novel, done in Zoom format for a YouTube performance

**When:** Now through Saturday, July 11; stream time begins at 7:30 p.m. for each ticket although the purchase can start the performance at any time during the following 24 hours

**Tickets:** \$20; online at [naplesplayers.org](http://naplesplayers.org)

how to tell a story without props such as staging and and costuming. Each of the characters, in fact, dug up their own costumes and found their best home Zoom "stage." That wasn't hard with an updated setting, Walck said. The Naples Players lent a few critical accessories, such as the blue face paint for Lizzie.

Walck and the cast broke the play up into scenes and spent days Zoom-blocking them to synchronize each character's visual gags

"At every physical comedic moment we were saying, 'Wow, how are we going to tackle this via Zoom and make it funny' because ultimately this is a comedy," she said.

Olivia Petersen, a Barron Collier High junior who has the role of Lizzie, was neck-deep in that creative retooling. Its sendup of the Lizzie-Darcy dance scene "went from leaps and and turns to trying to fit in our little cubicles doing the macarena or something," she said.

"It's funny because we're not even in the same room," she said of the dance. But creating her headstrong Lizzie from afar isn't the major challenge, she said. The hardest part is playing the performance without the nurture of audience reaction.

"It's probably one of the greatest parts of theater for me, performing with an audience, watching their behavior — whether they're reacting or not, what they like."

She finds the characters fun under Hamill's sly caricatures, however, and she has an advantage with the play being videotaped for streaming performances: "I'll be seeing it along with the audience!"