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SPOTLIGHT

St. Olaf, Prairie Creek collaborate on original opera

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Professor Dale Kruse instructs Katie Hagaman about the coming opera Jan. 10 at Prairie Creek Community School. (Photos by Sam Wilmes/Northfield News)

St. Olaf College students and Prairie Creek Community School children are working together this month on an original opera about the origin story of animals.

The collaboration is part of an academic civic engagement course for St. Olaf students, a way for them to take classroom lessons and apply them in a community setting. Their engagement with the 180 students at Prairie Creek is likely their most immersive work before becoming a student-teacher.

In the first two days of this year's class, St. Olaf students created a 10-minute opera with new music and text based on "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," performing the bit in front of Prairie Creek students as an introduction.

If you plan to go

The public performance of the original opera, performed by Prairie Creek Community School students, is slated for 7 p.m. Jan. 28 at Northfield Middle School. Tickets are free.

This is the third time St. Olaf students and faculty have collaborated with Prairie Creek in what's become an annual arts residency training. Previous collaborations took place in 2014 and 2017.

"We were very excited about it," said Prairie Creek second- and third-grade teacher Nancy Dennis. "We have an arts residency every year at Prairie Creek, and we typically do it in January, and so the timing worked perfectly."

This time, Prairie Creek students are developing the story and coming up with melodies. St. Olaf students then take the students' ideas to create the choreography and music.

"It's a very different process now than it was the first time," Kruse said. "The first time, the St. Olaf students basically wrote a story and wrote music, taught it to the students and performed with them."

St. Olaf students are with the youngsters during the morning, and then go back to the college for the afternoon to formulate student ideas and discuss what worked that day and the approaches need work.

"There's so many ways that students can create melodies, and there is many ways that my students are learning to extract said melodies from them," Kruse said.

Because of the scope of the work they are doing in a relatively short amount of time, St. Olaf students have admittedly become emotional at times but know that this is still a rewarding process.

"What these kids are doing is an immense amount of work," Kruse said. "It's immense, but they love it so much that even though they're exhausted, and I think some of them are probably stretched way beyond what their comfort level is, they all see the value in what they are doing."

“You don’t really know how to do this until you start doing it and start working with kids, but there also have been so many moments where they come and are so excited by what they have just done and learned,” he added.

For third-grader Arlo Eastvold, there is nothing particularly challenging about the project.

“It’s overall really fun,” Eastvold said.

Classmate Meadow Allen said warmup activities are her favorite part, while first-grader Milla Roven enjoys participating in activities with the entire school.

St. Olaf Junior Emily Thompson said as a music education student, the collaboration is unique because of the freedom it allows her in the learning process. Although creating the opera has been difficult for her at times, Thompson believes it’s good for her to work with teachers and glean information from professionals.

“I’m really glad that I got to be a part of this,” she said.



St. Olaf College junior Emily Thompson instructs students during the beginning stages of practice for the opera slated to be performed Jan. 28 at the school.

Of the 15 St. Olaf students participating, 12 are music education majors or want to be. Three more are performance-related majors. Their interests closely align with the project’s emphasis on performance, acting, movement and composing and writing music.

“The vast majority of these students are wanting to be music educators, and I think some of them actually are going to have changed their mind on what level they are going to be,” Kruse said.

To Kruse, even if his students do not teach elementary students, the class is still important for them.

“This entire project this month I get to spend with them is really about allowing students to be creative, and they bring it to everything they do,” he said.

“In a way, it’s the very best way of thinking about being a global citizen, working with everybody to bring out the best in what they are doing.”

To Dennis, the approach Kruse has taken has been beneficial.

“He has brought an amazing energy to this process,” she said. “He is just a fantastic, energetic, fun man. And he’s brought so much energy and joy and love to this whole residency for the children. They just have so much fun, and I think the students have so much fun as well.”



To ease the stress of practicing for hours at a time, Prairie Creek students are allowed to play in the gym for a time. (Sam Wilmes/Northfield News)

Dennis sees the collaboration as a way for students who struggle in a typical classroom setting to buy in and participate.

“This is a great opportunity for them to step forward,” she said. “It’s just really remarkable and wonderful to watch them.”

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