

Aspiring actors work out on school stage

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Brian Buff stands in the center of the stage in Aquinas Institute's auditorium. On either side of the drama coach stand two lines of students facing each other, following Buff's hand movements as he leads a game of verbal Ping-Pong.

"You've got to keep on the ball," Buff tells the students, unaware of his pun. "This game is done a lot on Broadway. It builds teamwork and cooperation."

Buff, director of Aquinas Institute's Summer Theater, points to the line of students on his right. "Ping, ping, ping, ping!" they shout in unison as Buff's hand darts back and forth.

Then his left hand shoots towards the other line. "Pong!" they yell.

Back and forth, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, the students enunciate their "pings" and "pongs" according to the teacher's movements until finally the line on Buff's left messes up a "pong."

"The winner!" Buff shouts, pointing at the right-hand line. The students then break up into small groups to rehearse the three one-act plays they will be performing Thursday, July 27.

The drama program at Aquinas has grown rapidly in the last year, Buff says as he sits down on the stage. Part of that growth, he notes, has been this year's establishment of the Aquinas Institute Summer Theater, which started its sessions on July 10 and will conclude with a 7:30 performance of Bel Kaufman's "Up the Down Staircase" Thursday, Aug. 10.

Forty-five students, ranging from seventh-graders to college sophomores, paid \$60 to participate in various theater workshops running Monday to Thursday from 6:30-9 p.m. In these workshops, the young



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

Brian Buff, director of Aquinas Institute's Summer Theater, signals a group of students to respond in a game of verbal "ping-pong." The game is an exercise in teamwork and cooperation, which helps the students warm up for more serious rehearsing.

theatians have learned about creative movement, improvisation, lighting and sound, makeup and theatrical history.

In the lobby outside the auditorium, eight students rehearse John McNamara's award-winning one-act play "Present Tense." Heather Gray, who will be a freshman at Aquinas this fall, talks quietly about her role as Margie, a 13-year-old cheerleader in love with one of the main characters, Doug.

"She wants Doug to like her," Gray explains. "She's supposed to be, like, not stupid." Although she is intelligent, Margie is boy-crazy, a condition to which Gray can't relate. "I have some friends that are really boy-crazy," she says, noting that she bases her characterization on her friends' actions. "I like boys and everything," she confesses, "but I'm not ecstatic."

It was the ecstasy of the spotlight that drew Natalie Palermo, who will also be a freshman in the fall, to sign up for summer theater. "You get to be like a different person on stage," she says, watching her fellow actors rehearse Richard Lortz's "Voices." "Everybody's watching, and you get all the attention," she adds, her face widening in a smile.

Lauren Russell said she has similar motives for being at Aquinas this evening. "I like to pretend I'm other people," says the Nazareth Hall seventh-grader.

Behind the curtain, and not in front of the crowd, is where you'll find Matthew Plouffe, a prospective sophomore. "I've always liked technology and working with my hands and stuff," he notes. "I'm stage manager... I've been wanting to do it all last year."

Plouffe remarks that he has helped his uncle wire cars, but he's never had to deal

with the complexity of the wiring in a building like Aquinas. "You learn about new stuff — like how to get shocked," he says with a laugh.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Admission to the July 27 performance, which will take place at 7 p.m., costs \$1. Tickets for the Aug. 10 show are \$2 for the general public, and \$1 for children, students and senior citizens. The July 27 performance includes Lucille Fletcher's "Sorry, Wrong Number." For information, call Brian Buff at 716/254-2020.



Jon Russell and Molly DeVecchio rehearse "Voices."

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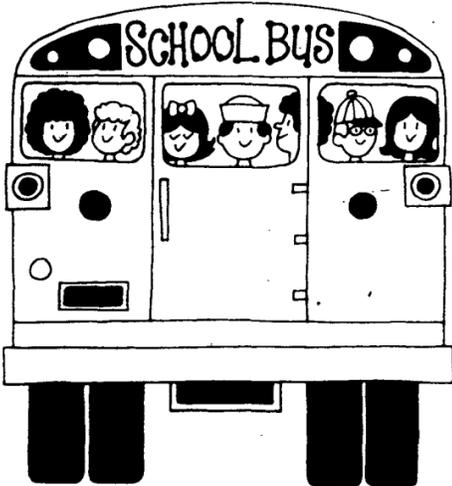
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