

BY ALEX DAVY
PHOTO BY MARSHALL FRANKLIN LONG



Rebecca Rechkin and
Iain Bigalk rehearse
under the watchful eyes
of HARMONY Theatre
founder Elena Khalitov.

Sweet Harmony

Local children dazzle with adventurous, original theater.

ELEVEN-YEAR-OLD POLINA PEKUROVSKY IS HALFWAY ACROSS THE CHICKEN YARD when Jeremy Roth shoots her. She collapses in a loose tangle of limbs, very quietly, one hand clutching her heart. In an instant she's up again, tiptoeing away.

The "chicken yard" is a basement rehearsal space. A long row of piled-up chairs marks its borders, and Roth stands guard over its solitary chicken—a dented steel teapot. The co-artistic director of HARMONY Theatre wears a handkerchief over his eyes and holds an invisible shotgun. A few more fall to his gun before another girl reaches the "chicken." Grabbing it by its spout so the handle won't clank, she eases it into her arms and creeps offstage. Roth slides off his blindfold at the sound of cheering and flashes a quiet smile. "All right, everyone," he says. "Rehearsal's over. Your parents are waiting."

Based just north of the Edina on Excelsior Boulevard,

HARMONY is a tiny troupe—just 13 children between the ages of six and twelve, bolstered by local professionals—but its ambitions are huge. With a small cast, child actors and virtually no budget, they've mounted 13 original productions since their founding in 2004—but it's the content that really stuns. They've staged a radio drama, fairy tales based on world folklore, adaptations of Chekhov's plays and two moving historical dramas about World War II. Their latest production, *The Road to Life*, was set amid the desperate 900-day siege of Leningrad.

Pretty heavy stuff for a group of grade schoolers. "It can be difficult stuff to talk about with young kids," says Elena Khalitov, HARMONY's founder and the play's co-author. "But I think it's very, very important. It's a chance to teach them history and compassion."

Khalitov emigrated to the United States shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and many of



HARMONY Theatre
6121 Excelsior Blvd.
763.442.1628
centerharmony.org

the actors share her Russian heritage. "We encourage children to celebrate their ancestral roots," she says. "These stories are part of their past."

Telling those stories was no mean feat. Facing a two-hour run time and an 11-year-old protagonist with hundreds of lines to learn, Roth and Khalitov worked their troupe to the limit.

"Elena and Jeremy pushed us really hard," says Lizzie Shilko, 10, "but it was a big success. Many people still compliment us on it."

Pekurovsky, who played the main character, is the daughter of Russian immigrants and the first member of her family to be born in the United States. "It was fun to learn about where I come from," she says. "The rehearsals were hard, but we got through it."

Still, Roth says, he never doubted they could do it. "Almost all children are great actors. It's easy, they have this natural ability to inhabit a character," he says. "At the same time, we were doing a show about Leningrad and they just can't naturally relate. That was the biggest challenge, getting them into the mindset of someone who isn't safe, who doesn't have enough to eat."

The show opened in December to rave reviews. "It was so moving," Khalitov says. "There were some audience members—they really had tears in their eyes. I'm very proud of our children, and proud to work with them."

Despite the grueling workload, HARMONY is popular with parents, too. "I adore this place," says Daron Dolynchuk, mother of 8-year-old actress Ella. "They write original stuff. There are no auditions. The kids don't have to try out. There's no stress and the shows are amazing."

The company is gearing up for a busy summer. In addition to classes, workshops and an original adaptation of *The Little Prince*, HARMONY Theatre will embark on the Rekindle Cinema project, producing a series of short films that document the history of St. Louis Park.

"I really consider it a part of Ella's schooling," Dolynchuk says. "They're doing serious material; they're reading and interpreting. It's helped her with school; it's helped her with her confidence. But more than that, it's like a family here. It's a truly wonderful place." //



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