

'Excalibur: The Story of Young King Arthur' opens at MPC's Storybook Theatre

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You are capable of big things; you're capable of miraculous things in your life if you believe in yourself."

This a message oft repeated by Merlin, the famous sage who oversees King Arthur in "Excalibur: The Story of Young King Arthur," the first MPC Storybook Theatre offering for 2008.

The play opens Friday on Monterey Peninsula College's studio stage.

Don't look for the well-known wizard to don a pointy hat, nor a blue polyester robe with moons and stars all over it.

Director Mark Engelhorn ("Hansel and Gretel," "Little Mermaid") and his crew started out their latest project with a piece of paper and two columns — one of cultural traditions Arthur represented that they wanted to preserve, and the other of things they wanted to avoid. The pointy hat went in the second column.

"We call that the Excalibur Casino and Resorts Merlin," said Engelhorn. Storybook Theatre's version of the wizard will run closer to the older, Druid origins.

Merlin (Richard O. Mueller) narrates the story of

King Arthur's (Matthew Pavellas) early life with a little help from magical devices spiced with special effects.

"He takes a position of a teacher both to the young King Arthur and to the kids in the audience," the director said.

"The sacred relationship between a student and a teacher," as Engelhorn names it, is one of the universal concepts the play expounds that is recognizable generation after generation.

"I think when doing theater like this the authenticity springs from an honest exploration of the emotional, human ideas of the piece," he said.

As a kid, Engelhorn was "just voracious" when it came to all things Arthur. In 1981, his dad took him to see the movie "Excalibur," which left him with one, consuming idea: "At some time in my life, I must own a suit of plate mail!"

He has two, which he brought into his English class recently to suit up a couple students for "Henry V."

Another theme in the play includes some pretty difficult sibling rivalries. "It wouldn't be easy to have King Arthur as a brother."

Ironically or not, Engelhorn's brother, John Engelhorn, is the lighting designer for the show. ("It's so great!") His wife, Lyla, is doing costuming.

There won't be any real horses on the studio stage, but you'll hear them and hear about them. "The actors have to do a lot of storytelling," said the director.

And they will sound the part while doing so. "Yes, we're going with the accents. With King Arthur,

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it's such a deeply English tradition."

The director is working to unify his cast's speech. "The funny thing about accents in England is there are so many of them."

The ages of the actors are spread from teens to seniors.

"It's so wonderful to be able to work with a cast like this. Theater is a craft that's passed on from generation to generation," said Engelhorn. He says this system is much more efficient and more fun than what can come from a class.

As for the villainous Morgan LeFay, "She has been bravely rehabilitated in this production. She has more dignity," he said.

"The whole tradition of King Arthur is an outgrowth of two sentences the Roman historian Tacitus wrote," Engelhorn said.

No one knows, of course, who exactly King Arthur was, or if he was as such, but the artistic evolution of this hero figure continues. "It grew into an amazing literary oak tree that's still growing."

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THEATER OPENING ·What: Monterey Peninsula College Theatre Company's Storybook Theatre presents Michele L. Vaca's "Excalibur: The Story of Young King Arthur" ·Where: Studio Theatre, Monterey Peninsula College, 980 Fremont Blvd., Monterey ·When: Opens at 7p.m. Friday, Feb. 8; continues at 7 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 3 p. m. Saturday and Sunday matinees through Sunday, Feb. 24 ·Tickets: \$15 general, \$12 youth, \$9

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