

Teen's life takes dramatic turn on Theatricum stage



Fourteen-year-old Graco Hernandez has a starring role in "Rose Cottages," at the Theatricum Botanicum in Topanga. (John McCoy/Staff Photographer)

By Rebecca Kheel, Staff Writer

Posted: 07/25/2011 03:06:13 PM PDT

Most 12-year-olds wouldn't know how to capture the grief of a first-century B.C. Roman whose friend and leader was just stabbed 23 times. But that's exactly what Graco Hernandez did two years ago when he performed Marc Antony's famous "Friends, Romans, countrymen" monologue from "Julius Caesar" at a student Shakespeare competition.

"I think the judges thought I was very strong and very emotional," said Hernandez, now 14 years old. "I played it exactly how a man would if he saw his friend dying."

His performance as Marc Antony set him on a theatrical path to a starring role in Topanga's Will Greer Theatricum Botanicum's production of "Rose Cottages," which makes its West Coast premiere Saturday.

"Rose Cottages," first performed in an off-Broadway theater in 1986, centers on a dilapidated motel in South Florida and the misadventures of its owner, Rose, and the guests, who grow to become a de facto family.

Hernandez plays Lydell, a handyman at the motel. The part was originally written as an 18-year-old soldier AWOL from basic training, but was rewritten by playwright Bill Bozzone specifically for Hernandez as a teenage runaway.

Though Hernandez was always interested in acting, he never stepped onstage until two years ago. When City Hearts: Kids Say "Yes" to the Arts, a 27-year-old program that teaches arts to at-risk youth in impoverished schools, came to Academia Avance Charter School in Highland Park, Hernandez signed up for the program because he thought it would be fun.

Once in the program, Hernandez was asked to participate in its inaugural Shakespeare Challenge, where he performed Marc Antony's speech. Among the judges at the competition was Ellen Geer, Theatricum's artistic director.

"He has an old knowledge within him," Geer said of what struck her about Hernandez's interpretation of Shakespeare.

Geer was so taken by Hernandez, she offered him a scholarship to Theatricum's summer camp. He continued to shine during the camp, undertaking the title role in "Hamlet."

When it came time to cast "Rose Cottages," Geer, who also stars in the play as Rose, presented Hernandez to the director, Heidi Helen Davis. Geer said Hernandez's progression from City Hearts to summer camp to starring role is the only time that has happened at Theatricum.

Davis was skeptical of casting the teenager in a role meant for a young adult. She remembers Hernandez showing up to his first audition with long hair covering half of his face and delivering a decent, but not outstanding, performance. Still, she called him back for a second audition, out of curiosity, to see what he would do next.

"He seemed to have an emotional openness that most 14-year olds have to learn because they are protecting themselves," Davis said. "And the next time he came in, his hair was plastered back, he had his speech memorized and he was better prepared than everybody else who auditioned who were 10 years older than him."

Though Hernandez's acting experience starts and ends with City Hearts and Theatricum's camp, Davis said



Graco Hernandez, left, and Earnestine Phillips rehearse on July 19, 2011, for "Rose Cottages," at the Theatricum Botanicum in Topanga. (John McCoy/Staff Photographer)

and theatrically.

For now, Hernandez is concentrating on opening night and making his professional debut.

"I feel ready, but I'm also not sure if I'm ready," he said. "I am definitely going to be nervous when it opens."

IF YOU GO

Rose Cottages

What: West Coast premiere of a comedy about a de facto family that forms at a rundown motel in South Florida.

Where: The Will Geer Theatricum Botanicum, 1419 Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga.

When: Opens at 8 p.m. Saturday and plays weekends through Oct. 2.

Tickets: Free for children under 6 to \$32 for adult tickets in lower tier. www.theatricum.com, 310-455-3727.