

The following story ran on the air and online on WHYY's Newsworks on

Children act as chorus in very adult 'Winter's Tale' in Clark Park By Peter Crimmins

The annual performance of Shakespeare in West Philadelphia's Clark Park opens Wednesday with "The Winter's Tale." The dark, psychological drama will be performed with a chorus of local children. "The Winter's Tale" is an unusual Shakespeare play; two-thirds of it is tragedy, then it wraps up almost like a comedy. The tragic parts are gruesome -- with violent jealousy, a man throwing his wife in jail and condemning his newborn daughter to be killed by fire.

"This is a family drama," said director Kittson O'Neill. "The people in our world who witness and suffer the most from family dramas are children. I wanted a chorus of kids to witness the play and add flavor to it." Twenty-five children, ages 5 to 13, form the chorus. It's more of a classic Greek chorus -- a collective witnessing the action -- than a singing chorus, although it does occasionally perform musically. The kids also form pieces of the set (ocean waves) and function as basic scene transition distraction.

"I like it because we get to do a lot of acting and stuff," said Paloma Hatch, 7. "We get to be other people. I like being other people, because it sounds fun and, um ... that's just what I like doing." The meat of the play is performed by a cast of 12 professional actors, including Barrymore Award nominee Kevin Bergen and J. Paul Nicholas ("Law and Order: Special Victims Unit"). Even during the darkest moments of the action, the children are present. For the most part, they come off as the kids they are. Sometimes they fidget, lose focus, forget what they are supposed to do. They often steal the show.

"A lot of times I have to say, 'Stop doing stuff. We are trying to listen to a very important speech,'" said O'Neill. "But there are one or two moments that I deliberately made it all about the kids, and nobody cares what you're saying, and it's fine." Many of the children have never acted before. They emerged through open auditions that spread -- mostly by word-of-mouth -- through Philadelphia schools, a theater summer camp by West Philly's Curio Theatre, and Settlement Music School. Most live within walking distance of Clark Park.

The children of the chorus open the performance with a play-within-a-play, a quick, amateurish exposition of the childhood friendship of the two kings. It comes off like an elementary school play, and the rest of the cast play their parents. The adults are also the court of Leontes, and they immediately set in motion of tragedy of Shakespeare.

"The kids are 5 or 6. Some parents were, like, 'Whoa, this is too deep for my kid to be in,'" said child wrangler Christina May, who taught the kids their parts. "I think we have a group of kids that understand the story and are excited to be part of it. We have a cool group of kids."

"I go, 'Hut! Hut! Hut!' and walk into places," said Adeline.

"I am Autolycus' minion," said her older sister Lily, referring to the character who is a petty thief. "I'm setting up a party and stealing things for Autolycus."

"I don't understand it all the way," said Molly, the eldest. "Now that I'm in it, I can understand it more because I'm rehearsing it over and over again. It's explained to me as I go."