

Call of the wild

BY Marc Ingber - Sun Newspapers

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To prepare for their latest theater piece, students at the Main Street School of Performing Arts in Hopkins found inspiration from two unlikely sources - the Minnesota Zoo and YouTube.

Students in the school's acting class transformed themselves into animals Wednesday night, Nov. 14, for a performance art piece. The students were asked to assign an animal to a fellow student - one that seemed an unlikely match, and therefore unique challenge to enact.

Students studied and reviewed their assigned animals at the Minnesota Zoo, as well as in YouTube videos, picking up their behaviors and characteristics. In the performance, students dressed in costume and did not break character.

"It's been challenging," said Jessica Zerby, a senior from Excelsior assigned to portray a bison. "It's different than anything we've ever done."

Most challenging, Zerby said, is the physicality.

"The walk is pretty difficult and the way you have to position your body takes a lot of back and neck strength," she said.

Theater instructor William Leaf said the students learned the meaning of the word "nuance" in the assignment. Portraying animals, he said, allowed students to focus on specific nuances of movement and sound.

"With an animal you are unfamiliar with, you have to dissect it a little more," Leaf said. "I think it's a huge challenge, but it's fun. It's kind of outside the box."

After the assignment, he said, the students should be better equipped to portray human characters with the same nuance they gave their animal performances.

In her last three roles, Sharee Buell, a junior from Golden Valley, narrated a pirate story and played a magazine editor and a Pygmy Slow Loris - a monkey-like animal. For the first two, she said, she relied on human characteristics. But "to disconnect that for an animal character is really hard," she said.

"It's definitely a challenge, but it's really fun," she said.

Other animals portrayed last week included a beaver, coyote, flamingo, turtle, gibbon, Green Aracari - a type of toucan - and a panda.

"We are really thrilled with this exercise," Leaf said. "This project is imaginative and requires the students to extend themselves in new and interesting ways."

Jessica said the project would help her in future acting roles.

"It will help with physical characteristics in people," she said. "It's pushing yourself as far as you can go physically."

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