

Academy stages "Julius Caesar" Feb. 9-11

By Catherine Fahy

CHARLEMONT — Trust blood and daggers to get teenagers interested in Shakespeare — and adults, too.

At a recent weekend rehearsal for the Shakespeare drama "Julius Caesar," a group of students from the Academy at Charlemont learned the subtle use of weapons in the famous scene where Caesar is assassinated by a group of conspirators.

"Breathing, lots of breath," said Shakespeare & Company Co-director Carmen-Maria Mandley, demonstrating how to make it look as though the dagger was sliding beneath a muscle in Caesar's back.

Taking a break from the six-hour dress rehearsal, Mandley, who with Co-director Kelly Galvin is staging the epic drama as part of a Shakespeare & Company residency at the Academy, said the Academy has staged a number of comedies in partnership with the Lenox-based theater company, but this will be its first drama.

Mandley said the cast of 30-plus students has been rehearsing the play since November and said she thinks audiences will find it very engaging.

"They tell this story in a way that's unique to Charlemont because their sense of community is so strong and the support from the school is so strong," said Mandley, wearing green sweat pants and a gray T-shirt suited to all the moving and bending she



Seamus Hawks, filling in for Waverley Engelman, rehearses the assassination of Julius Caesar, played by Ben Miller.

was doing.

Shakespeare & Company is well known for its collaborations with schools, staging its annual Fall Festival of Shakespeare with hundreds of students from schools throughout western Massachusetts and New York State. The Company has been conducting school residency programs since 1985, tailoring each program to fit each school's unique needs.

Stephanie Purington, Academy mathematics teacher who serves as the liaison with the Company, said her interest stems from her older daughter's six-year involve-

ment in the Academy theater program. She said with five out of six grades reading Shakespeare at some point during the year, teachers have found that acting the scenes has made Shakespeare's archaic language much more understandable.

At the start of each collaboration with Shakespeare & Company, Purington said students are required to translate their lines into modern English so they can really understand the meaning and emotion of what they're saying on stage.

"If you don't know what it means, how can you convey to the audience what it means?" Purington asked.

While sometimes confusing to read, Purington said Shakespeare's texts endure because they capture the human condition so accurately.

"The themes are universal: love, betrayal, passion, hate, death, life," she said.

After years of comedies, she said the school chose "Julius Caesar" as its first Shakespeare drama because it can accommodate the large number of students who wanted to be in the play, with big roles for the more experienced actors and lots of ensemble scenes.

"Plus, they get to play with swords and blood," Purington said with a laugh.

Helping ninth-grader Rosa Shapiro-Thompson learn how that fake blood will magically

appear on her leg during a scene in which she stabs herself in the thigh, Mandley described the blood as a gel with the consistency of peanut butter.

"It smells funny. You'll have fun," Mandley said to Shapiro-Thompson, who plays Brutus' wife, Portia, as well as a soldier who's killed and dragged off-stage.

After the rehearsal, Shapiro-Thompson said she appeared in "Twelfth Night" and "As You Like It" and said she is ready for the challenge of a drama.

"The emotions are deeper," she said, approaching the long rack of Roman tunics in bright fabrics provided by Shakespeare & Company. "I also like the fake blood. That's really awesome."

Nearby, waiting for a fitting with costume designer Peggy Walsh, eighth-grader Cassandra Bigelow, wearing a simple white tunic and leather sandals, said this has been her first acting experience.

"I thought maybe it was something for me and I'm having a lot of fun doing it," she said.

The Academy at Charlemont in collaboration with Shakespeare & Company will present "Julius Caesar" at 7 p.m. on Feb. 9-11, with a free matinee at 2 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 11. Tickets are \$10 for general admission and \$6 for students and seniors. Reservations are recommended and can be made by calling The Academy at 413-339-4912.