

High school dancer finds new tone in 'Aida'

By STEPHEN MONTEMAYOR
SMONTEMAYOR@THEWORLD.CO.INFO

During the musical "Aida," which opened Friday at Theatre in the Park, Nubian slaves piece together a robe and present it to their princess while performing "Dance of the Robe."

The robe must be huge; the effort in which it was assembled must be great. Choreographer Liz Ernst said she told her performers they must convey that the robe was created by their hands with struggle and not simply

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Liz Ernst
Choreographer

a prop supplied by the theater's costume department.

"You have to understand it's taken you freaking years to make — by hand," she said.

So goes one of many instances of struggle in the production. For one young Nubian,

portrayed by an incoming junior at Mill Valley High School, the play represents a shift in tone from previous roles and the tone in which she's grown accustomed to performing.

Michaela Jamison, also a member of her school's Silver Stars dance team and a competitive dancer very nearly since she began walking, said she had long preferred being "cheesy" onstage. "Over the top," she added. So far, though, she's welcomed the change

SEE MILL VALLEY, PAGE 7

THE DISPATCH | JULY 13, 2011 SCHOOLS | 7

Mill Valley student hopes to combine dance, aid

FROM PAGE 1

of scenery. The adjustment has not been lost on Ernst, also Michaela's instructor at Overland Park's LE Dance studio.

"There's just great intensity in her movement but also in her face, where a lot of dancers can be flat," Ernst said.

Whether between routines in the studio or reclining in her living room on the eve of a show, Michaela is indeed expressive. She said friends call her "theatrical." Ernst added flamboyant to the list of descriptors.

It's why whenever there's a new member to the dance studio, Ernst said, Michaela is usually up talking to them within minutes, asking which school they attend — chances are she knows someone there.

Michaela has danced in Ernst's studio since she was 7.

"Liz looks out for me as much as my mom," Michaela said.

Previous Theatre in the Park productions for Michaela include 2009's "The Wedding Singer" and last season's "All Shook Up" — both of which were helmed by "Aida" director Greg Shaw.

Shaw said it's easy to forget Michaela is just halfway through high school, as she is often a mentor to the cast's younger girls.

Michaela said her dream college would be Texas Christian University. Another option would be Bethel College in Newton, where her dad, Alonzo, coaches basketball. Alonzo Jamison played basketball from 1989-92 at Kansas University. KU could be another option — it's close to home, Michaela said.

She said she'd like to continue dancing and also pursue missionary work.

In fact, she'd like to return next year to South Africa. It was there last year where she traveled with volunteers from Shawnee's Westside Family Church.

It was her first experience outside of the country, Michaela said. She camped on a pineapple farm, and ate warthog sausage and ground springbok almost every night.

She volunteered at soup kitchens, often also giving away the shredded bologna and cheese mixture volunteers got for their lunches.

She said that for reasons she can't put



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Michaela Jamison will be a junior at Mill Valley High School. She is performing in Theatre in the Park's "Aida" this week.

into words, she is pulled to the country and would like to stay longer next time. She even considers moving there after college.

This all despite the crisis that nearly extended her trip. As the mission neared its end, Michaela lost her passport and had to be driven five hours in the early morning to the United States

Embassy to request a new passport. Thanks to her mother, Jennifer Seeber, being a notary, Michaela was able to obtain the paperwork needed before the embassy official left for a dental appointment.

It's a story Michaela laughs about now with her mother while sitting in her living room wearing a shirt from last year's "All Shook Up."

She laughs but is actually a little nervous, she said. She's going to be wearing a microphone for the first time in "Aida." And another shift: Michaela has a line in the show. But it's just eight words, she said.

"It still counts," her mom said.

"I like to think it counts," Michaela said, smiling.

"AIDA"

Where: The Theatre in the Park, 7686 Renner Road.

When: Thursday through Sunday, 8:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$8 for adults, \$6 for children. Reserved seats, \$20.