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Around the fire

Stories of love, bias, and fear

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At the bucolic lakeside of a Maine summer camp for girls, the pond monsters aren't real, but the young campers and counselors still encounter deep and dark things — their own emerging sexualities, homophobia and savage harassment. This is the setting of acclaimed lesbian playwright Carolyn Gage's *Ugly Ducklings*, which was nominated for the American Theatre Critics Association/Steinberg New Play Award in 2005 and won *Curve Magazine's* 2004 National Lesbian Theatre Award. This weekend renowned theater activist Cathy Plourde will direct the play at Colby College, and around it has convened a mighty, interdisciplinary coalition of thespians, gay-rights activists, and gender and sexuality scholars.



The stories of *Ugly Ducklings'* young characters include new sexual awareness, homophobia, love and infatuation, attempted suicide, and vicious, biased power plays. But there is also the story of *Ugly Ducklings* itself — that is to say, its creation, mission, and brave collaborative production by Hardy Girls Healthy Women, a central Maine nonprofit, and Greater Waterville's Communities for Children and Youth. There are also the narratives of specialists like Lyn Mikel Brown, a Colby scholar of gender, sexuality, and girl-fighting studies, and consultant for the show. Finally, there are the stories of the 13 young actors — aged 10 to 22 — who bring themselves to the production; their own personal experiences with homophobic epithets and bullying in their schools and communities.

All of these stories, layered deeply around the staged campfires, will be the subject of an educational documentary film, directed by Academy Award-winner cinematographer Fawn Yacker.

These concentric stories, and this convergence of artists and disciplines, unites a statewide and national campaign to end bias-based harassment of gay and lesbian youth. The coalition aims for an impact on several levels: media and policy-makers; educators and youth organizations; the audience that will sit in Colby's theater; and the actors and their families, themselves. Audience discussions will follow performances of *Ugly Ducklings*, with surveys to complete. And in addition to submitting Yacker's film to such venues as HBO and Sundance, the creative team will include it as part of a Community Action Kit, with discussion guides and other educational materials, that will be made available nationwide.

Under Plourde's direction, the actors of *Ugly Ducklings* — 13 girls and one adult — have been at work on the difficult layers of these roles and social issues for a little over a month, and have had movie cameras in their faces since day one. Yacker filmed a pre-interview with each actor — and, in many cases, with

their parents — prior even to first rehearsal. She asked the girls about their experiences with the sort of bias and harassment that the play explores, as well as their feelings about their characters — some of whom are troubled, repressed, or far from tolerant. They'll be interviewed again after the run of the show, and the measure of their evolutions will be revealed.

The young women involved in *Ugly Ducklings* have come to the project via different angles of interest — for some, theater, for others, gender and sexuality issues. Jeanette Richelson just graduated from Colby, for example, where in the course of her Queer Studies major she worked with Professor Lyn Mikel Brown. Others, like Sage Paquette-Cohen, an eighth grader from Monmouth who grew up acting on the stage of Cumston Hall in the off-seasons, heard about *Ugly Ducklings* through theater-related channels.

These girls readily concede that they mostly come from very liberal and open households, though sometimes from very sheltered communities. They hope that folks of many different backgrounds and beliefs — and not just the choir — will attend the show. Abby McCann, who goes to Winslow High, thinks that a lot of the epithets she hears tossed around school are a result of students' lack of exposure to differences in sexuality.

"I don't think people understand the nature of the words they use," she says.

The cast of *Ugly Ducklings* is not just well-spoken about these issues — filmmaker Yacker calls their articulateness "mind-blowing" — but adept at drawing other civil rights tensions and social elements into the conversation. Hannah Lennett, who's from Lewiston, cites the city's notorious situation with its Somalian population, and compares the fears and ignorance that feed each prejudice. Jackie Mannocchi, the daughter of two upper-middle class women, brings class into the mix, saying that as an athlete and the child of a doctor, she was spared the harassment that might, under other social circumstances, run rampant.

It was hard, at first, for recent Kennebunk High grad Samantha Shandorf, a bisexual young woman, to become the play's biased and conniving villain Vanessa, until she considered the ways she thought her character felt fearful, inferior and marginalized, herself. There are many layers to tolerance and intolerance, and as an exercise in trying to understand each other, the *Ugly Ducklings* project has yielded rich results even before opening night.

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