

Theater kids meet famous director

By JENNIFER SHEA
Correspondent

Spencer Smith desperately wants to be an actor — not just for the fame — because he likes “the idea of simply becoming someone else,” he said. Spencer is a senior at Sarasota High School; he is a second-year student in the Sarasota High School theater program.

The program is led by **Melissa Dweck**, the Sarasota County High School Teacher of the Year in 2010.

Dweck was recently contacted by director Shana Sosin regarding rehearsal and filming of “Free Ride,” an independent film written and directed by Sosin.

Dweck quickly accepted the opportunity for her students to observe the preparation and filming of a major motion picture. The Sarasota High auditorium was used for rehearsals and her students received guidance from Sosin. “Shana was just so patient and wonderful with the kids,” Dweck said.

The theater program is established much like college-level drama programs: Drama One, aka D-1, students are taught a basic overview of acting, business, public speaking and public relations. D-2 students learn the technical aspects of theater and film, building and painting sets for the various productions. D-4 and D-5 students spend their last two years acting and singing their way through three to five productions.

Dweck’s dedication to the theater program and word of the successful thespian classes have created an enormous swell in demand for the course.

“We had less than five openings available for incoming freshmen this year,” she said. “My D-3/D-4 classes have 54 students.”

Budding actor Spencer, handsome with deep sapphire eyes, was accepted as an intern at the Players Theatre last year.

He said that he was very excited to attend the rehearsal of “Free Ride.”

“Just to get to watch them do



The Sarasota High School theater program recently received a visit from indie film director Shana Sosin for rehearsal and filming of her new motion picture, “Free Ride.” The film stars “Twilight” vamp Cam Gigandet and True Blood actress Anna Paquin. According to drama adviser and teacher Melissa Dweck, center, Sosin graciously spent time with her students, answering questions and teaching them about acting and the film-making process. From left: Matthew DeMichieli, Kayla Nelson, Alexa Wassmer, Dweck, Kyle Kulpeksa and Spencer Smith. “I was all googly-eyed over Anna Paquin, but Miss D explained that famous people are only famous because we made them famous,” Spencer said. *CORRESPONDENT PHOTO / JENNIFER SHEA*

their job — that was awesome,” he said. “I haven’t really been around famous people before.”

“Free Ride” is the story of a young mother’s efforts to escape an abusive relationship and her struggle to support her daughters.

The film stars “Twilight’s” scruffiest heartthrob — sans sexy shoulder-length vampire tresses — **Cam Gigandet** and HBO True Blood actress **Anna Paquin**.

The indie film is based on Sosin’s childhood.

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Matthew DeMichieli is a junior in his third-year in the program. Michael mentioned that both he and Spencer took turns beaming at Paquin, who was a bit too busy rehearsing to notice.

“I am somewhat shy, so this program has been really good for me,” Matthew said. “Also, I’ve never been really comfortable with criticism, but I feel safe here — like if people say something to me that is critical, it’s not an attack.”

Alexa Wassmer is a senior in her second year in the program; her platinum hair, russet eyes and soft-spoken voice are reminiscent of Michele Williams’ recent portrayal of Marilyn Mon-

roe.

“I came in expecting to do more acting because I was in an AP Acting class before I moved here,” Alexa said. “I came in to D-2 and it’s been really great.”

“It really is like a family — not so much drama, besides the acting,” she whispered, grinning.

Kayla Nelson, a senior in her first year in the drama program, is diminutive and vivacious.

“I got to know Miss D through my sister and I knew that I wanted to be a part of this crazy program.”

According to her acting students, Dweck is their teacher, friend and disciplinarian.

“There is a defined focus on respect in my classes,” Dweck agreed. “But it is human respect — this is a safe place to learn your craft.”

“Our kids really put themselves out there and there is no judgment, there can’t be.”

Kyle Kulpeksa is a junior in his third year of drama. His wholesome appearance invites the inevitable comparison to a young Brad Pitt. Kyle said that he has known since he was seven years old that he wanted to act.

“When I first started this program, I thought it would be a great class but I didn’t expect to get so attached,” Kyle said. “From the first week, we were like family.”

Dweck and her students have

adapted plays to better accommodate the number of students in the acting classes; they have also written original productions.

“We have so much talent in this program; it is hard to find productions that will accommodate our casts,” she said.

She added that she is working with AICE program director **Merlin Schenk**, to add AICE Drama, a higher level class for students who are interested in an advanced placement theater experience, for the 2012-2013 school year.

The “Free Ride” experience was valuable for her students, Dweck said. “Because they saw the whole thing — behind the scenes.”

“They met the continuity person, they got to see the production from the perspective of the director and ask her questions,” she continued. “Again, Shana was so good to spend the time with them.”

Dweck’s pride in her kids is palpable; “I could not do what I do with these kids without our principal, Mr. Hradak and David Jones, who was our assistant principal,” she said. “They really helped me build the program; they always support us — 100 percent.”

“My kids are so intellectual and so polite, they really touch people. I have the best job in the whole world,” she said, beaming.