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Highlights: At Northern Stage, a Teenage Actor Has Become a Veteran

By David Corriveau Valley News Sta Writer

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At 15, Olivia Swayze already sounds like an old hand at this thing called theater.

That can happen when you start your acting career at age 6, as a teacup in *Beauty and the Beast*, and follow a winding path through works by Charles Dickens, Thornton Wilder and Roald Dahl.

“I think the tipping point was playing Rebecca Gibbs, which is the biggest child’s role in *Our Town*,” the Tunbridge native said last week of Northern Stage’s 2015 production of the Wilder classic. “I sat on the ladder, looking into the lights, and while delivering my speech, I nally started to gauge the audience’s mood.”

Swayze expects a more rollicking vibe to pervade Northern Stage’s production of *Matilda the Musical*, which opens this week and runs through New Year’s Day.

“It’s great that we’re doing so much Roald Dahl,” Swayze said between rehearsals at the

Barrette Center for the Arts in White River Junction. “I love all the whimsy and fantastical things (Dahl) brings to his work.”

Eric Love, who also directed Swayze in *James and the Giant Peach* during Northern Stage’s intensive program for student actors and stagehands last summer, has enjoyed watching the Sharon Academy sophomore adopt an even bigger role on stage than she’s playing onstage as the title character’s brassy classmate, Hortensia.

“She’s older than most of the kids in the *Matilda* classroom, but she t right into the classroom,” said Love, Northern Stage’s director of education. “She’s been like a den mother to these other kids. She’s been encouraging them, giving them compliments. They also look to her for etiquette in rehearsal and preparing themselves in the dressing rooms.”

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Swayze is returning the favors she’s been receiving since her 2009 debut in *Beauty and the Beast* in Northern Stage’s Youth Ensemble Studio (YES) program. By age 11, she was performing in the company’s 2014 production of *A Christmas Carol*, followed the next year by *Our Town*, then a 2016 revisiting of *A Christmas Carol*. And last spring, she played a devoted teen fan of The Beatles in the dramedy *Only Yesterday*.

That rst production of *A Christmas Carol* was an eye-opener for the then-11-year-old.

“I was still new to everything that goes into a big musical,” Swayze said. “It was a rush of craziness for a while, but I had a lot of people helping me adjust to it. Everybody on the sta is part of my family.”

The stage family for *Matilda* includes 30 student actors — many, like Swayze, veterans of the YES program. While Norwich resident Danielle Cohen (as Mrs. Phelps) and about a dozen Equity actors will play most of the adult roles in all 55 performances, the students will share the kids’ roles — led by White River Junction resident Bebhinn Knudson, taking turns with Kylie Benoit, of Belchertown, Mass., as Matilda Wormwood. Lyme’s Tessa Cullen will alternate with Swayze as Hortensia. The cast includes young actors from around the Upper Valley and as far a eld as Chester and Stockbridge, Vt., and Wentworth, N.H.

While “a good handful” of the youngsters gained valuable experience in *James and the Giant Peach*, Love said, many of the younger thespians are performing alongside Equity actors for the rst time. Among the pros are Tom Ford (whose credits includes *By Jeeves* on Broadway) as the chief villain- teacher Agatha Trunchbull, and Lisa Karlin (from the national touring company of *Pippin*) as Matilda’s mother, Mrs. Wormwood.

“I really see their eyes popping when they’re onstage with these actors,” Love said. “It’s the best education we could possibly give them.”

For Olivia Swayze, such experiences make it worth the drive from Tunbridge to Northern Stage for rehearsals. and to voice coach Julie Ness’ studio in Hartland for singing lessons.

“Outside of acting?” she said of her schedule. “Let’s see: I sleep. I eat. Occasionally, I hang out with friends. I do juggle a lot but I really enjoy it. ... Acting is a great way of expressing emotions and individuality.

“I love to keep doing more.”

Northern Stage unveils its production of Matilda the Musical this week, with preview performances at 7:30 tonight and Friday night at the Barrette Center for the Arts in White River Junction. The musical adaptation of Roald Dahl’s children’s book o cially opens on Saturday night, and runs through Jan. 1. For tickets and more information, visit northernstage.org or call 802-296-7000.

Best Bets

Pianist Henry Danaher, cellist Margaret Gilmore and utist Leslie Stroud accompany soprano Chiho Kaneko through a concert of French chamber music on Friday night at 7, at the First Congregational Church of Lebanon. The quartet of Upper Valley musicians tackles works of Maurice Ravel, Louise Farrenc and Philippe Gaubert. Admission is \$15.

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■Medium Lauren Rainbow channels “Messages from Spirit” at the Claremont Opera House on Friday night at 7. For tickets (\$25) and more information, visit claremontoperahouse.org or call 603- 542-4433.

■The ArtisTree Community Arts Center stages three performances of Steve Martin’s comedy *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* at the Grange Theatre in South Pomfret this weekend, starting Friday night at 7:30. For tickets (\$20 to \$25) and more information about the comedy, which imagines a meeting of the minds between Albert Einstein and Pablo Picasso, visit artistreevt.org or call 802-457-3500.

■ Before screening *2001: A Space Odyssey* at Mascoma Valley Regional High School’s auditorium on Saturday afternoon, the Mascoma Film Society will show *Filmworker*, a 2017 documentary about Leon Vitali, righthand man to *2001* director Stanley Kubrick. *Filmworker* starts at 2 and *2001* begins at 4. Admission is by donation.

■ On the theme of “Marrakech to Mumbai: Dances of the People,” Gina Capossela leads her Raqs Salaam Dance Theater troupe through two performances at the Lebanon Opera House on Saturday. The dances, set for 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m., span the folk traditions of Italy, North Africa, the Middle East, central Asia and India. For tickets (\$25 to \$30) and more information, visit lebanonoperahouse.org or call 603-448-0400.

Theater/Performance Art

The Little Apple Circus visits Court Street Arts in Haverhill on Friday, to perform two shows that introduce Newton’s fundamental laws of motion by mixing juggling and other circus arts with comic acting. Admission is \$5, with performances scheduled for 9 a.m. and 12:45 p.m. For tickets and more information, visit courtstreetarts.org or call 603-989-5500.

■ Ampli ed Arts stages Shelly Hudson’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* at its theater in downtown Claremont on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights at 7. To reserve tickets (\$10 to \$12) and learn more, visit ampli edartsnh.com.

Music

New London physician Alan “Doc” Rogers performs folk and blues to lead o the Sunapee Community Co eeHouse on Friday night at 7, in the basement of the Methodist church in Sunapee Harbor. Over the second hour, members of the Co eeHouse crew will take the stage. Admission is by donation.

■ The folk duo Darlin’ Corey performs the Upper Valley Music Center’s eighth annual Mandolin/Fiddle Extravaganza around downtown Lebanon on Saturday, starting at 11:30 in the morning with a free jam session at Salt hill Pub.

Then at 1:30 and 2:45, band members Erica Brown and Matt Shipman will lead instrumental workshops at the music center. They’ll cap the extravaganza at 5 with a full concert at the center. The fee for each separate workshop is \$20; combined admission to the workshops and the late- afternoon concert is \$50. To learn more, visit uvmusic.org.

■ South Newbury, Vt., ddler Patrick Ross plays a solo concert at Whipple Hall in New London on Saturday night at 7. Admission is \$15 to \$20, bene ting the programs of the Lake Sunapee-area’s Center for the Arts. Advance tickets are available through Friday at New London’s Tatewell Gallery and Morgan Hill Bookstore.

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■ The Randolph-based folk-rock group Second Wife plays the monthly Corinth Co eehouse on Saturday night at 7, at Town Hall on Cookeville Road. Admission is by donation to The Mentoring Project.

■The Upper Valley Chamber Orchestra performs works of Mozart and Debussy during its fall concert on Sunday afternoon, at Richmond Middle School in Hanover. Tickets to the concert, which starts at 3, cost \$10 at the door. To learn more, visit uvmusic.org.

■The Kearsarge Chorale opens its fall series of concerts on Sunday afternoon at 3 in New London, with a program that includes Ola Gjeilo's *Sunrise Mass* and Craig Hella Johnson's *Considering Matthew Shepard*. The performance is at Colby-Sawyer College's Sawyer Center. To reserve tickets (\$5 to \$15) and learn more, visit New London's Tatewell Gallery or Morgan Hill Bookstore, or visit kearsargechorale.org.

Dance

The Tango Norte ensemble of pianist Bob Merrill, violinist Thal Aylward and bassist Peter Concilio plays *milonga*-style tango music for a lesson and a dance at ArtisTree Community Arts Center in South Pomfret on Sunday afternoon. The lesson starts at 3, and costs \$10 for attendees not planning to stay for the dance. The dance runs from 4 to 7, and costs \$15 for dancers not taking the lesson. Dancers aiming to do both pay \$22. To learn more, visit artistreevt.org.

Film

The Billings Farm & Museum in Woodstock screens the documentary *Burned: Are Trees the New Coal?*, at 3 and 5:30 on Saturday afternoon. The Woodstock Vermont Film Series advises calling 802- 457-2355 no later than Saturday morning to reserve tickets (\$6 to \$11). To learn more about the series, visit billingsfarm.org/lmfest.

Bar and Club Circuit

Singer-songwriter Sky King covers classic Americana, pop hits from the 1960s and 1970s, bluegrass tunes and Irish-pub music at the Peyton Place Restaurant in Orford tonight at 6.

■Mr. Tom's Band pulls into Windsor Station tonight at 7 to play a set of Americana music. Rusted Chrome plays classic rock on Friday night at 10 and the soul band Hambone performs on Saturday night at 9:30.

■Saxophonist Michael Parker and guitarist Norm Wolfe play jazz at Crossroads Bar and Grill in South Royalton on Friday night at 8:30, and reunite on Wednesday night at 6 at the Quechee Inn at Marshland Farm.

■Gold Tooth Gator plays the blues at Skunk Hollow Tavern in Hartland Four Corners at 9 on Friday night.

■About Gladys rocks Salt Hill Pub in downtown Lebanon on Friday night at 9, and the folk duo of Mark and Deb Bond performs on Saturday night at 9.

■Turner Round performs a set of rock at Salt hill Pub in West Lebanon on Friday night at 9. At the same hour on Saturday night, Flew-Z frontman Alec Currier plays a set of acoustic rock.

■Singer-songwriter Chris Powers plays Salt hill Pub in Hanover on Friday night at 9, and the roots duo Two Random Guys performs on Saturday night at 9.

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■John Lackard sings and plays the blues at Newport's Salt hill Pub on Friday night at 9.

■Rocker Chris Powers and singer-guitarist Alison "AliT" Turner perform at the Farmer's Table in Grantham on Saturday night from 6 to 9.

■Sonny Saul plays jazz at the On the River Inn in Woodstock on Saturday and Wednesday nights from 6:30 to 9.

■Saxophonist Mike Parker and singer-guitarist Alison "Ali T" Turner perform at SILO Distillery in Windsor at 1 p.m. Sunday.

Open Mics

String players of all ages and abilities are welcome at the weekly acoustic jam session at South Royalton's BALE Commons on Friday night from 6:30 to 10.

■The Sunapee Community Co eeHouse hosts its monthly open mic on Friday night at 7, in the basement of the Methodist Church in Sunapee Harbor. Admission is by donation.

■Joe Stallsmith leads his weekly hootenanny of Americana, folk and bluegrass on Monday night at 6 at Salt hill Pub in Hanover.

■Fiddler Jakob Breitbach leads an acoustic jam session of bluegrass, Americana and old-timey music on Tuesday nights at 7 at The Filling Station Bar and Grill in White River Junction.

■Tom Masterson hosts an open mic at Colatina Exit in Bradford, Vt., on Tuesday nights at 8.

David Corriveau can be reached at dcorriveau@vnews.com and at 603-727-3304.

Entertainment news can be sent to highlights@vnews.com.

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