

Review of *Murder at the Old Keene Mill*

By Jack Child, Lead Theatre Critic at Falls Church High School Cappies

Have you ever passed a local street sign and wondered how the road got its name? This curiosity prompted a group of students at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology to research and adapt into a musical the history of Old Keene Mill Road in Burke, Virginia. *Murder at the Old Keene Mill* tells the true story of the murder of Lewis Hall in 1856 and the corresponding trial and appeal of William Keene in 1857. The dramatic tale is presented as an animatic musical one-act with a storyboard feel. The project, which was 11 months in the making, employed inspired use of color, clever adaptations for an animated format, and convincing voice acting to create a thoroughly entertaining and engaging experience.

Murder at the Old Keene Mill was the brainchild of Quentin Lovejoy, who composed eight original songs, wrote the book and lyrics, mixed the audio, and directed the production. Lovejoy's passion was abundantly evident, and his skill shone through in the quality of the music and lyrics. In the role of assistant director was Valo Dandashi, who also contributed much to the musical. Dandashi composed the percussion parts, designed sound for the show, contributed to the book, and animated the courtroom scene. The work of these two students alone created a promising foundation for the rest of the show.

The most impressive part of *Murder at the Old Keene Mill* was the animation. The students at Thomas Jefferson split up the hefty task between seven animators: Rachel Kwon, Valo Dandashi, Naz Ansar, Meera Gupta, Svet Pack, Mayuka Valluri, and Champe Mitchell. An animated medium allowed for creative decisions which could not have been executed in a live performance. Exaggerated facial expressions, thought bubbles used to portray the imagination or memories, and cartoonish effects dramatically increased the appeal of the show. Also noteworthy was the importance of color. The production was presented almost entirely in black and white, but the color red was used carefully and sparingly to bring attention to certain parts of important scenes. This technique made Hall's blood more jarring, the harshly accusatory John Barker's handkerchief more eye-catching, and Barnett Stewart's bowtie more vibrant.

While the animators certainly should be commended, they were only one half of the equation that brought the characters to life. Voice acting from the Thomas Jefferson students rounded out the animated figures seen on screen. Impressive coordination between voice actors and animators meant that each character's physical appearance and voice meshed together seamlessly into one individual with a believable personality. Particularly notable voice acting performances came from Ryan Lien, who gave his all in the role of John Barker, and Jay Abraham, whose clear, brassy singing voice beautifully carried the emotions of William Keene as he resigned himself to his fate as a condemned man.

Months of preparation by Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology paid off in *Murder at the Old Keene Mill*. The extraordinary efforts of the animation crew, coupled with the voice work done by Jefferson's actors, formed a memorable, fun, and endearing musical

experience. Next time you encounter a strange road name, consider looking into its history. Who knows? There may be potential for an outstanding musical hidden in its past!