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'The Children's Hour': PFAA show illustrates the power of deceit

By Lorin McLain, The Daily Courier

PRESCOTT - This "Children's Hour" is no "Sesame Street."

The Prescott Fine Arts Association opens its new production this weekend, a drama about the tragedy brought on by a vicious rumor spread by a vindictive boarding school student.

PFAA veteran Jean Lippencott directs this version of the Lillian Hellman play.

"The Children's Hour" debuted with an element of controversy in the early 1930s because of the nature of the story's subject matter.

Prescott resident Layne Longfellow, a relative of poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, offers an eloquent twist of irony in the opening of the story by reading a few stanzas from his forebear's poem of the same name, in which the author expresses his adoration for his three daughters: "I have you fast in my fortress, and will not let you depart, but put you down into the dungeon in the round-tower of my heart."

"The Children's Hour" paints a villainous portrait of a teen with a special capability for manipulation. Chino Valley High School senior Briana Polland plays Mary Tillford, the student with deep-seated issues who lies her way into getting what she wants while bullying her classmates.

Mary interprets her teachers' inquiries into her inconsistent alibis as harassment, and gets in on the gossip of an argument between a prodding relative, Lillie Mortar (Julie Cargill), and a teacher at the school, Martha Dobie (Jill Goodell Hale).

Hearing that Lillie has told Mrs. Dobie that "there's something funny about her," and that Mrs. Dobie's feelings for her friend Karen Wright (Linda Fine) are "unnatural," Mary conveys the rumor as fact to her grandfather, Robert Tillford (Lance Sandleben), an influential figure in the community who takes the matter to heart.

Mary blackmails her schoolmate Rosalie (Katherine Hammer) into corroborating her story, bringing alarming consequences to the adults involved.

Critics praised Hellman, who was a relatively unknown writer when she wrote the play at 26, for the psychological insight and intensity of the story.

The dramatic nature of the material calls for a cast with a fairly professional level of execution, and the actors in the major roles perform to a degree believable enough to draw you into the story, which revolves around how the lie draws the characters into a spiral of confusion and mistrust.

Polland's Mary really comes off as a menace, and Hammer shows a knack for the craft in her portrayal of Rosalie.

Lippencott keeps the show moving with good pacing and stage technique.



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Mary Tillford, played by Briana Polland, yanks the hair of Peggy, played by Crystal Hallenbeck during the dress rehearsal of "Children's Hour" at the Prescott Fine Arts Association in downtown Prescott on Monday night.