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Artist enjoys challenge of designing posters for local productions

MONSON – After nearly 70 years of studying, teaching and creating visual art, Virginia Midyette has yet to run out of ideas.

Midyette, a Monson resident, is a retired art teacher and longtime volunteer poster artist for the Monson Arts Council. Her current design, for the arts council's spring production of "I Hate Hamlet," will soon be appearing on posters and in newspaper advertisements.

"She is just wonderful," said Barbara Keffer, the play's producer. "She does things and doesn't expect recognition. She is so pleasant to work with."

"I love doing the posters," said Midyette. "The most fun is trying to get ideas."

She does this, she said, by first reading the play very carefully and looking at pictures in the script, if there are any. She also observes the actors in rehearsal and often incorporates their images into the design.

Although she makes many sketches, in media ranging from pencil to magic markers, she said the very first sketch is often the best. "The first thing you do is faster and quicker," she said, and usually captures the core idea of the design.

Design concepts have also arisen from Midyette's experience as an elementary art teacher in Hampden, where she taught for 27 years, and from her 19 years as a volunteer art teacher at the Children's Study Home in Springfield.

The poster for "That Thing Called Love," a collection of one-acts about romance, was inspired by a youngster's drawing, Midyette said. The image of a kissing couple, who share one pair of lips, came from a child's drawing of her older sister kissing a boyfriend, she recalled.

Midyette's passion for art, however, has deep roots stretching back to her childhood, which was spent mostly in Springfield. (She lived for about a year and a half in Monson.) She was always interested in drawing and painting, she said. She graduated from the former Classical High School in Springfield and went on to earn a degree in art from Smith College in 1942.

But before she began her teaching career, she served as a naval communications officer, stationed first in Bayonne, N.J., and then in New York. She met her husband, Allen, a North Carolina native who was also in the U.S. Navy, in Jersey City. "The war mixed people up," she said, with a smile.

Virginia (known as "Ginny" to most) and Allen were married in Springfield in 1944. They celebrated their 64th wedding anniversary on Feb. 26. The couple has resided in Monson for many years and enjoyed traveling abroad, especially to France and to Sweden, where Ginny has relatives. (Her maiden name is Carlson.)

Asked why her interest in art has endured, she said, "All you know about some civilizations is what they made. It helps us understand other cultures and what they saw." Producing one's own art, she added, "is a way of telling the world what you saw."

Midyette's graceful, often playful view of her world continues to be displayed in her poster designs and in the children's section of the Monson Free Library, where she sets up special exhibits. She recently received a special award for her many years of volunteer service at the library.

And her fencing figures on the "I Hate Hamlet" poster will help to promote the two-act comedy by Paul Rudnick, in which the ghost of the famous actor John Barrymore, played by Brent Northup of Monson, haunts the New York apartment of TV heartthrob Andrew Rally, played by Sean Landers of Blandford.

"I Hate Hamlet" will be presented April 11, 12, 13, 18, 19 and 20 in Monson's Memorial Hall. Friday and Saturday performances are at 8 p.m. and Sunday matinees are at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$14 and \$12 and may be purchased at the door or by calling the producer at 413-267-4286. END