Female Hamlet highlights Shakespeare at Winedale performances in Round Top

ROUND TOP, Texas — Shakespeare at Winedale student Lana Lesley can’t explain the emotions she felt several months ago when Dr. James Ayres asked her to play Hamlet for the summer program. She is still in shock.

"Doc (Ayres) called me in early March to ask what I thought about doing Hamlet," said Lesley, who will be the first female to play Hamlet during the annual UT Austin Shakespeare at Winedale performances. "I thought he meant the play. ‘No,’ he said, ‘Hamlet, the Prince.’"

But now, after weeks of studying the character and the play, Lesley can’t wait until the curtain opens. "The challenge of Hamlet begins with his first words and I’m ready to speak them."

Lesley, a Houstonian, is one of 17 students this year who are studying the plays of William Shakespeare through classroom discussion, improvisation and performance at UT Austin’s Winedale Historical Center near Round Top. Their efforts will culminate with 24 performances of Hamlet, Twelfth Night and All’s Well That Ends Well, which will run Thursday through Sunday July 22-Aug. 15. Evening performances begin at 7:30 p.m. and afternoon performances on Saturday and Sunday will begin at 2 p.m.

Not only is this the first time for a female Hamlet, it also is the first time All’s Well That Ends Well has been on the program. This summer there will be four weekends of performances instead of the usual three.

"We are trying to accommodate our growing audience and the extra week will give us another chance to explore the changes in the play from performance to performance," said Ayres, the UT Austin professor of English who has taught the Shakespeare at Winedale course since he conceived it in 1970.

Each year he selects students from the UT system and from other colleges and universities across the country. Students receive six hours credit for their work at Winedale, where they devote their days and nights to Shakespeare for several weeks before the public performances begin. The students make their own costumes and are responsible for sound and lighting.

"It is not easy to do what we do," said Ayres. "They students will tell you that. I will tell you that. And, when we do, you will think we are joking. You see us only at the end of our experience," he said. "These are young people of great courage, industry and imagination. They confront language, personality and human history well beyond their experience every moment of a very long day for what seems a lifetime."

Because a dramatic production is a synthesis of related arts, students learn all of them at Winedale, Ayres said. "They do not have the luxury of being students. They must be performers, critics, scholars, designers, costumers, make up artists, musicians, fencers, dancers, singers, lighting and sound technicians, and so on."

Ayres said that he has been asked why he chose a woman to do Hamlet and why he has not chosen one before now. "I do not select students for the play I have in mind or select the play for students I’ve chosen. I’ve wanted a person who was willing to take the challenge of Hamlet," he said.

"I wanted a courageous, intelligent and sensitive person...someone who would spend time with me reading, talking about the character, digging into the words...someone free of tradition, someone who could explore a fresh, bold, exciting understanding of the character. This time I chose Lana. She’s determined, at once very excited and scared to death. That’s a good start," Ayres said.

The theater at Winedale is four miles east of Round Top on Farm Road 2714. All seats are $4. For reservations, call the Winedale Historical Center at (409) 278-3330, or write Shakespeare at Winedale, P.O. Box 11, Round Top, Texas 78954.