



DRUMMER RICHIE DANFORD keeps the beat for Harmony.



SHARING MUSIC during rehearsal are (from left) Kenneth Emanuel, Melissa Robinson and Shane Pittman.

STAFF PHOTOS BY SUSAN USHER

Harmony, Sweet Harmony!

New West Brunswick Show Choir Makes More Than Music

BY SUSAN USHER

From 20 talented individuals West Brunswick High School chorus teacher Pattie Jordan has molded "Harmony," a close-knit show choir that wowed schoolmates in December with a Christmas act showcasing a smooth sound and precision moves.

They sing, they dance and they're good, especially for a team created only this past September.

In an entertaining 20-minute package of solo and ensemble work, they performed approximately seven songs, from lively interpretations of "Rudolph" and "Baby, It's Cold Outside" to the sentimental "Merry Christmas, Darling."

Buoyed by the success of their first public performances, Harmony's already hard at work on a spring clown show that will find members donning black and white clown costumes with colorful pom-poms down the front.

They intend to have most if not all the routines polished by early April, to take to their first state show choir competition at Carowinds.

Before their December performances at Bolivia Elementary, Shallotte Middle and West Brunswick High schools, ensemble members were a little nervous about how they might be received, especially by their peers.

"We were terrified at first they would laugh at us," said Tina Tripp. "But they were surprised. They were impressed. What we had wanted to do was make them smile, and we did it."

"It's a wonderful feeling when your peers come up to you and say 'that was a great solo' or 'How did you all get that dance step down pat?' And Jordan says she's been having students ask about being in show choir."

Tripp joined the group a little late because of a scheduling situation and at first found the experience "a little weird" because she had never been a part of anything like Harmony.

Now, she says, "I love it. We all get along like a family. We have good days and we have bad days. We kid around a lot but we give our best to everything we do."

Jordan handpicked the 20 performers who together make Harmony. They meet for five days a week in an hour-long class the students say passes entirely too quickly. They come from all four grades, and include five seniors, three freshmen and mostly sophomores. Two members have been Jordan's pick for all-state chorus two consecutive years.

"Grades, attitude, musical talent, personality—they have to be pretty wonderful to make show choir."

"It's just another type of choir for them to be in," she insists on one hand, while adding in a yes-it's-really-true whisper, "and it's very motivational."

A surprisingly large number—three or four of the boys—are athletes, like Jamal Stanley, who plays full-back and linebacker on the Trojan varsity football team and forward on the basketball team, and Kwabena Green, another Trojan linebacker.

Their strength and agility are added assets in the acro-



PARTNERS LEAH SLOANE and Sam Chevalier work on a number that will be sung in English and American Sign Language in the spring clown show.

batic moves that add occasional flash to Harmony's routines. For one number, the close requires Heather Hilton, Kwabena's partner, to be hoisted astride his shoulders. But being in Harmony requires more than athleticism.

"Kwabena can sing and dance up a storm," says Jordan. "He's good!"

Playing ball and performing with the choir hasn't been a problem because of what Jordan describes as "wonderful cooperation" from coaches. "If ball practice is scheduled the day the choir has a performance, the players are excused from practice," she says.

Once chosen for the class students work as partners, 10 couples matched by height alone. They rehearse as an ensemble, and also as partners. They're accompanied by Jordan on piano, Matthew McDonald on bass guitar and Richie Danford on drums.

During class one day last week, students got to work quickly. As Jordan listened with a keen ear for diction and an understanding of the music, they ran through songs for the clown show.

The selections cover the gamut of emotions from laughter to (mock) anger to tears and have dramatic potential: "The Lord Loves A Laughin' Man," "(Anything You Can Do) I Can Do Better," "Me and My Shadow," "Ease On Down The Road," "A Brand New Day," and one number that students will sign in American Sign Language for the deaf. And, of course, "It's A New World Coming," the theme song with which Harmony closes every performance.

After their group work, Jordans sets the partners to work on their own dramatic interpretations of "(Anything You Can Do) I Can Do Better," with the teasing caution, "I want to see a minimum of abuse. No hitting your partner!"

As a visit to class suggests, each show is the result of a well-thought-out process of preparation and a vision. Jordan's style isn't demanding so much as that her expectations are consistently high. Students find themselves working hard—and enjoying it.

"In a show choir the sound is No. 1, then the choreography," says Jordan.

That means students first memorize all the music "frontward and backward," while working on facial expression and understanding. Only then do they focus on adding choreography, then costumes and the all-important smiles of the stage performer.

For the team's second show, several students have volunteered to try choreographing a few of the numbers—the kind of initiative that Jordan takes quiet pride in.

While in her fourth year of teaching at Shallotte Middle, this is only Jordan's second year at West Brunswick. Dividing her time between the two each day, she has two afternoon classes at the high school—show choir and a larger, all-girl treble choir.

The veteran music teacher began her first show choir in 1972 at the same time she began a stateside teaching career at the Fort Bragg base high school in Fayetteville.

"Before that I was overseas in places like Ethiopia where you weren't likely to have a show choir," she said.

Jordan took that show choir—the first she knew of in North Carolina—to perform for the N.C. Music Educators Association's annual convention not once, but twice. It was a smashing success, and soon other show choirs were popping up across the state.

If student response here is any indication, Jordan may see that same kind of ripple effect in Brunswick and nearby coastal counties.

"We get to sing and work together with people we didn't know at the beginning of the year and we're getting closer as friends," says Jamal Stanley, who is Tripp's partner. "It's fun because we all do it together and make it sound good."

Harmony is available to perform for local community organizations for Christmas programs or other occasions. While the choir doesn't charge, Jordan says "We'll gladly take donations." She can be reached through the high school, 754-4338.



IT'S A SHOW-STOPPER. On the front from left are partners Tina Tripp and Jamal Stanley and Tonya Stewart and Jonathan Fisher. On the back from left are Gretchen Sturdivant and Ty Brown, Heather Hilton and Kwabena Green.