



Maria and the Von Trapp children on stage in *The Sound of Music* at Montecasino in Joburg. The production will run until June 8.

PICTURE: MOTSHWARI MOFOKENG

Stage is alive with talent

LALI VAN ZUYDAM

THE HILLS are indeed alive with the sound of music, and four city youngsters are shining in their roles as the Von Trapp children in the musical, *The Sound of Music*.

Two of the children performing in the production, running at Monte Casino, are from Crawford Preparatory School Pretoria.

Ariane Angelopulo, 10, and Rachelle Weiss, 11, two Grade 5 pupils, play 9-year-old Brigitta von Trapp in the classic musical.

Homeschooler Manie Kohn, 12, plays Friedrich von Trapp. Sorin Conradie, 8, is one of the youngest performers and attends Louis Leipoldt Primary School in Centurion. She plays Marta von Trapp.

The musical, featuring some of the world's most well-known songs, including *Do-Re-Mi*, *My Favourite Things* and the title song, *The Sound of Music*, tells the story of Austrian postulant Maria Rainer who is encouraged to spend time away from the Nonnberg Abbey to decide if she is ready for convent life.

The Mother Abbess arranges for Maria to be the Von Trapp family's governess.

Maria teaches the seven Von Trapp children the basics of music because their father, Captain Georg von Trapp, is always away from home and has lost his love of music following the death of his wife.

When Captain von Trapp returns home a month after Maria's arrival, he announces his plans to marry

Child actors get a chance to shine in 'The Sound of Music'

Elsa Schröder. At their engagement party, Brigitta, played by Rachelle and Ariane, tells Maria she thinks Maria and the captain are in love with each other.

This leads to Maria returning to the abbey, apparently ready to take her vows. The Mother Abbess realises Maria is running away from her feelings and tells her to find the life she is supposed to live. She and the captain marry and secretly flee Austria after performing at the Salzburg Festival to escape the Nazis.

Captain von Trapp sings *Edelweiss* as a goodbye to his homeland, while using Austria's national flower as a symbol to declare his loyalty to the country.

The Von Trapps flee over the mountains to Switzerland.

The city children are part of three groups of children who play the roles of Captain von Trapp's children. The groups rotate in order to handle eight performances each week. There are six evening performances a week and two matinees over weekends.

Rachelle and Ariane have been best friends since they were three years old and both take drama, voice and dancing lessons regularly.

It was their drama teacher, Merle Feldman, who suggested they audition to play one of the Von Trapp

children.

"I got a big fright when I saw how many children were actually auditioning, so imagine my joy when I made it through," said Rachelle.

The girls did not only have to showcase their singing ability at the auditions in October but were also judged on their dancing skill and harmonising.

After a successful first round of auditions, the four young performers were called back to the next round.

"I went to the auditions for fun. It was a really good experience for me," said Manie.

Again their skills were deemed worthy and in December they were called back for yet another round of auditions.

On December 19, Ariane and Rachelle's dreams came true when they were cast as Brigitta.

"It was nerve-wracking but fun. I really wanted to get exactly the part I got," said Ariane.

Their performances during the auditions were recorded and sent to London to be approved by the Rogers and Hammerstein Library in London.

Manie said he spends on average 18 hours backstage each week.

"My favourite part of performing is singing," he said.

"Each show is about two-and-a-

half hours long and each team of children performs about three times a week. It is really amazing to perform in front of nearly 2 000 people every show, and to be in such a large-scale production. I love it, and I also really enjoy being with the other children in my show family," Rachelle said.

The children had to take a month off school to rehearse full-time from March. Sorin said she caught up on schoolwork on Saturdays when she was not performing and only attended classes when she wrote tests.

"Once the show started I didn't go to school the day after if I was on stage the night before," she said.

The pupils, by law, perform a maximum of three times per week and are on standby three times too.

"Our schools had to sign an agreement to help us by sending us schoolwork to catch up on during the month of rehearsals, and then to support us during the performances," Rachelle said.

In the first week of April, the girls had their first on-stage rehearsals and the show opened on April 5.

"I love acting and singing with my friends. The props are incredible and I love wearing my costumes. I wish it could go on forever," said Ariane.

"I want to be a professional actress, and since *The Sound of Music* started I have developed a desire to sing in the real Salzburg Festival some day," said Rachelle.

The show has been extended to June 8.



Rachelle Weiss, back left who plays Brigitta von Trapp, Manie Kohn who plays Friedrich, Sorin Conradie, front left is little Marta and Ariane Angelopulo who is an alternate Brigitta.

Still a way to go in accepting diversity

EUROVISION is famous for its outrageous contestants – from Lordi, the monster-masked Finnish rockers who took home the prize in 2006, to Ukraine's Svetlana Loboda, who pole-danced on stage in 2009.

Then there was the Lithuanian all-male entry in 2010, InCulto, who ripped off their trousers to reveal sparkly silver hot pants.

The annual event never fails to raise a few eyebrows.

But when Conchita Wurst, a bearded Austrian man – real name Tom Neuwirth – dressed as a woman, was announced the winner of the 59th Eurovision song contest with the song *Rise Like a Phoenix*, it was clearly a step too far for some.

Of course, panicked countries, including Russia, Armenia and Belarus, had tried to ban the 25-year-old's performance.

Some politicians got their knickers in a twist by insisting a bloke in an evening gown with a bit of facial hair would lead to a "hotbed of sodomy".

An Austrian Facebook group calling for her removal from the contest received 36 000 likes.

So while it is heartening to see such an act embraced (the winner is decided by public vote), the prejudice Wurst faced is a reminder that we still have some way to go in our acceptance of diversity.

Back in Vienna, Wurst was met by fans brandishing rainbow signs bearing such tributes as "Conchita Queen of Love + Tolerance".

Wurst used her return to London to speak to about open-mindedness.

"This will remain an issue for a long time and I fear I won't see the end of it in my lifetime," she said.

"It will be my life's work and I gladly take it on. It was not just a victory for me but for those who believe in a future that can function without discrimination and is based on tolerance and respect."

The singer clearly feels at home in the UK as she tweeted on her return: "Waking in London feels so good! It's like my 2nd home already good Morning to #theunstopables."

In Conchita's interview with UK chat show host Graham Norton on Sunday (aired in South Africa on Tuesday), she spoke of her plans for the future: "Our society is so fast so I'm going to sit back and choose wisely. I will have to make new stuff. My goal is a Grammy so my songs will have to be good. I have cast myself in the role of host at Eurovision next year in Vienna."

Lady Lloyd, star of London Live's *Drag Queens of London*, agrees Wurst is a great ambassador for gender diversity. "She's doing it all for the right reasons. I love the message she sends," says Lady Lloyd (real name Lloyd Dixon).

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