

Arts

'Doctor Dolittle' and furry friends on

Bustling cast
a challenge
for director

By Paul Hyde

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At any given rehearsal, Mia Phillips finds herself amid a swarm of screeching animals.

"We've got parrots, monkeys, dogs, peacocks, anteaters, hedgehogs and zebras," she says, listing just a few.

Phillips is directing the South Carolina Children's Theatre production of the musical "Doctor Dolittle," which features dozens of furry critters — or rather actors and puppets playing those animals.

"Doctor Dolittle," the beloved tale about the man who could talk to the animals, opens Friday for seven performances through Sept. 18 at the Peace Center's Gunter Theater.

The musical, by Leslie Bricusse, centers on the title character who is taught by his pet parrot Polynesia to converse in animal language. He and his friends embark upon a series of adventures.

Phillips says the mu-



The South Carolina Children's Theater presents "Doctor Dolittle" with Charles Poore (in hat) in the title role and from left, Ashley Cripps, Karis Phillips, 7, Annika Phillips, 10, and Matt Coker. OWEN RILEY JR./STAFF

sical is similar to the 1967 film of the same name, which starred Rex Harrison, although the stage musical's narrative structure diverges somewhat from the movie.

The stage show includes the familiar tunes from the film, however, such as the Academy Award-winning "Talk to the Animals."

Phillips' production boasts 40 singers/actors,

but an audience member would be forgiven for thinking the musical has a cast of hundreds.

"We have actors playing two or even three characters, and the majority of the ensemble has at least three costume changes," Phillips says. "It's a very busy ensemble. They're constantly coming off and on and becoming new characters."

Compounding the chal-

lenges of multiple costumes and characters are the numerous scene changes, Phillips says.

"We move from a seaside English town to a boat to an island," Phillips says. "We have a lot of different locations to visit."

She quips: "It requires a lot of organization."

Charles Poore, who plays Doctor Dolittle, won the starring role in a unique way: He auditioned

by Skype from Baghdad, Iraq.

Poore, a chaplain with the South Carolina National Guard, was stationed in Iraq but knew he would be back home in time for rehearsals — and he longed to play Dolittle.

Wearing fatigues, Poore transmitted a live audition from Baghdad to Greenville over Skype, the Internet voice and video application.

stage

YOU CAN GO

What: "Doctor Dolittle," the musical

When: 7 p.m. Friday; 1:30 and 5:30 p.m. Saturday; 1:30 p.m. Sept. 11; 7 p.m. Sept. 16; 1:30 p.m. Sept. 17; and 1:30 p.m. Sept. 18

Where: Peace Center's Gunter Theatre

Tickets: \$26; children to 18 are \$17

Information: 864-467-3000 or www.peacecenter.org

He nabbed the part by crooning "Edelweiss" from "The Sound of Music" while accompanying himself on guitar.

It was a first for S.C. Children's Theatre.

"I thought it was a wonderful idea, auditioning him by Skype," Phillips says. "When it's someone serving our country, you really want to work with him."

Not only did Poore earn a role in the show, but so did all the other Poores — his wife, Terrie, and children Griffen, 14; Graham, 13; and Gracie, 11.

This production of "Doctor Dolittle" includes live musical accompaniment by a 15-piece orchestra.

■ Arts writer Paul Hyde can be reached at 864-298-4004.