Jessica Winingham leads the “Puffs” cast and crew in warm-ups. The students practiced vocal and physical exercises in order to create a smooth transition between school and rehearsals. “Warm-ups help me separate school from rehearsal,” Reis Lourie said. “It also serves as a transition from school into the sacred space of rehearsal.”

Jessica Winingham cares deeply about creating an environment in which students can feel comfortable. The cast of her most recent play is composed of 25 students, including junior Madison Davidson, who plays various roles that mirror well-known characters from the “Harry Potter” franchise. “I feel that Ms. Winingham strives for diversity,” Davidson said. “She makes it clear that she wants a comfortable space for [everyone] and doesn’t want anyone to be [discriminatory] against people.”

For many cast members, it was their first time auditioning to be a part of a theatrical production. In order to curate a supportive space for newcomers to let go of their nerves, Winingham acted as a warm and encouraging presence in a cold, black room. “Going into the audition, she made sure everyone felt like they did an amazing job,” senior Jessica Steinberg, who portrays Sally Perks in “Puffs,” said. “That was something that I had never felt before from a director.”

A lot can change following a show’s final performance, but one factor will forever remain consistent in Ladue’s theater department under Winingham’s jurisdiction, the curtain will never close on community-building.

“I love how theater is so ensemble-based,” Winingham said. "I love [how] every show you make a new family. A lot can change following a show’s final performance, but one factor will forever remain consistent in Ladue’s theater department under Winingham’s jurisdiction, the curtain will never close on community-building."