

Behind The Scenes Of 'Seussical'

By Sarah Wetzel
For the Plain Talk

The University of South Dakota Department of Theater is in the midst of its 12-show run of "Seussical", a musical bringing the books by Dr. Seuss to life on stage. Performances will continue through this weekend with the final performance Monday at 7:30 p.m. in the Knutson main theater in the Fine Arts center on the USD campus.

Audience members are treated to two hours jam-packed with fun and colorful scenery and costumes, catchy tunes and more musical "Seussical" characters than you can count.

Sophomore Christa Gesicki, playing the Sour Kangaroo, says she has enjoyed playing the part, especially the sass that comes with it.

"It's not often you get to be that sassy," Gesicki said. "She's so physical and figuring out how I wanted her to move and create with her was just a fun experience."

According to the cast, a big part of pulling off a character involves understanding and connecting with the characters to truly make them come to life.

Freshman Austin Vetter stars as Horton the Elephant.

"I think my favorite part of doing the show was seeing these characters come to life onstage through the set and the costumes," he said. "I thought I connected really well with Horton. Both of us are pretty optimistic. The most challenging aspect for me was to keep the character sincere and be cheery and optimistic even when he has some sad situations come up in his life."

Some actors connected more naturally than others.

"I'd like to think that I'm not so sassy, but I have been told I have some spunk to me," Gesicki said.

Junior Kristian Asfeldt, leading the show as the Cat in the Hat, obviously has a lot of fun on stage. "When I first got cast, I had



Cast members of "Seussical" get in one final rehearsal before the curtains go up for performances.

a hard time because the Cat in the Hat has this general love of chaos and he really enjoys it when things go wrong and he can throw a cog in the system," Asfeldt said. "The thing I like the most is he's so insanely wacky. He gets away with doing all these crazy things because that's who he is and who people expect him to be. Through that he's able to bring about this strange sense of honesty because he's so insane and it shows in his relationship with Jojo as well.

"It's really fun," Asfeldt went on to say. "I never expected to find such a strong personal connection and love for this character that speaks mostly in rhyme and is written for children."

Another thing Asfeldt never expected was to be so impressed with the younger members of the cast, which includes several kids from the Vermillion community. "I do a lot with Ella, who plays Jojo in the show," Asfeldt said. "I'd never worked this close with younger children and I didn't know how this was going to go. I learned that doing what I'm used to doing is going to be more helpful to these kids onstage than worrying about they're doing as well. Often they remember better

than I do what's coming next and how events should go."

Asfeldt said all of the children were surprisingly engaged in the whole process and very excited to be there.

"It's awesome to see kids so young get excited about something like that," he said.

Certain aspects of "Seussical" make it a particularly enjoyable show to perform according to Asfeldt.

"I think with other shows we get caught up in the analysis of what it means," he said. "In this musical everything is laid out on the page. It gives you a lot more room to play around and figure out how you want to say it instead of trying to figure out just what it's saying in the first place. That's what removed a lot of stress."

No matter how fun the show, some stresses never go away as Gesicki pointed out.

"I don't know how we handle it," she said. "It's an incredibly busy time of year especially in our department. We have a showcase coming up in about a week for our choreography pieces and in our directing class we're working on, as well. As far as rehearsals, we were there close to midnight

most nights."

A highly supportive director, Callie Hisek, and faculty were key in survival during this time according to Gesicki.

"Callie, our director, was incredibly helpful about giving us breaks throughout the rehearsals, making sure we were staying healthy and hydrated," she said. "If we needed someone to talk to she was definitely there. Our professors were very understanding the whole time, as well, giving us extensions on different assignments. We were very, very lucky to have such supportive faculty."

The day of the show arrives and cast members are required to arrive an hour and a half before the show is scheduled to begin.

According to Gesicki, this time is spent with vocal and physical warm ups, microphone checks for the 12 lead actors and an hour for costume and makeup.

"Putting on all our makeup is pretty extensive for this show," Gesicki said. "I have to do a lot of makeup and my hair takes a while to do because I have to thread it through this weird headband with horns and whatnot."

No amount of preparation can prevent certain hiccups, according to the cast, though the performances have gone fairly smoothly.

"Just the other day one of our flies was going the wrong way," Gesicki said. "That was able to be fixed. We haven't had any late cues which was awesome, which is an actor getting to the stage on time. Lucky for us Kristian, who plays the Cat in the Hat, has been awesome at rolling with the punches and being really quick on his feet.

After each show, the actors get to bask in the feeling of completing a successful performance.

Asfeldt said some feelings he has experienced include rewarding, fulfilled, accomplished and successful, even when he feels he could have done better.

"I try to just let whatever happens happen and no worry about

it that much," he said. "If there's something I think I could have done better I just think about it a little bit and try to do it better the next time around."

"There's never any benefit of dwelling on the things that went wrong and generally that's going to make the performance worse than it would be otherwise," Asfeldt continued. "I try not to let that affect me. Ninety percent of the things that go wrong the audience can't even tell unless you make it obvious onstage."

Feedback so far has been incredibly positive, according to the cast.

"My dad said it was his favorite show that he's seen here, which was a little unexpected because I wasn't sure if it was my dad's type of thing," Asfeldt said. "It seems like most of the public is enjoying it and they're bringing their family and their kids. They'd say, 'I wasn't expecting my child to sit through it but they sat through the whole two hours and were so engaged.'"

Something shared by all the actors was an appreciation for the inspirational messages present in the musical.

"I hope people learn the power of the individual," Asfeldt said. "We need to be open to listening to different ideas instead of shutting them down right away because that's not how we're used to doing things or because they're scary or different. I hope people see how different ideas and opinions do matter and we can learn and make ourselves better through that."

Vetter agrees.

"I think one of the biggest messages is be friendly to everybody," he said. "Don't judge anyone differently just by who they are and what they look like."

For more information on the show or to purchase tickets, visit <http://www.usd.edu/fine-arts/theatre>.

Students

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project was a good learning experience.

"This was like nothing any of us had ever done before," he said. "Even down to the little plumbing stuff, it is skills that will come in handy sometime. It is more of a hands on learning experience, skills that you will use throughout your life. We will remember what we learned."

He said that the class really enjoyed the work and the word about what they were doing spread quickly through the school.

"Lots of people came down during the semester just to check out what was going on," Covington said. "I do see the program continuing and growing."

Pier added that while it was the first time a project of this magnitude had been completed at the school, he was still surprised by how some students gravitated to different aspects of the build.

"Some of the students took to it better than I thought they would," he said. "Some students enjoyed the electrical part of it, they really enjoyed the wiring. Some people that I never thought would be interested in it proved me wrong."

But in his mind the best aspect of the class is it offers real life training they can use after high school.

"The students, with the experience they got here, can actually go to work for an electrical contractor and start off - of course they would have to go to school to get their degree to get a license. But, it makes good entry level training."

He noted it was not just male students who found they were attracted to different aspects of the build.

"The reactions by some of the females were more interested in the interior part," he said. "One of them was very into installing the special floor. Builder's Choice had to send a guy to learn how to install this floor and when they came to show us how, she kind of gravitated to that."

No matter what he said the finished product was done by students of all levels of ability: students with special needs all the way to 4.0 students both male and female, Pier said.

"To see the finished project and the functionality is a big benefit rather than just doing something on paper," he added. "You see the finished product, how it works. They know where we

started and what they can accomplish."

HANDS ON ART

High school art instructor Justin Brunick, said the students in his CTE classes also learned both life and real world lessons in art focused classes offered at VHS.

"We have the photography, which we cover traditional and digital photography and the graphic design," he said. "We are currently working on letter head and business cards. I try to keep it more focused on the things that the students would see every day. With the business cards right now, each student has a teacher that they are working with that they have selected. That way it takes my personal preferences out of it and I become more like the CEO. The teachers are the client and the kids are getting real world experience."

He explained that the teachers were warned not to accept the first draft.

"I give the teachers a note saying, 'Hey, make sure you don't accept their first offer,'" he said. "To make sure they have to go through and make changes because that is how the real world will be."

In the photography classes, he said the first nine weeks are focused on

traditional photography, including dark room work - everything from rolling the film, to creating contact sheets.

"The photography, because it is something they will use for the rest of their lives, we try to give them tools they can use on an everyday basis," he said. "What is nice it gives them the opportunity to use their iPads in the classroom but they know they can go use (the programs) at home for free and get really nice results and not have to go out and buy an expensive program."

He noted that the kids in graphic design are more interested in the profession, such as where can I use this in a job setting.

Graphic design and photography are limited to 12 students due to the equipment the school has on hand.

COOK'S KITCHEN

Sarah Armbrust, family and consumer science teacher said that the classes in the CTE human services section focus on giving real life skills that students can use at home or take with them to any profession they choose to follow in the future.

"The students in Human Services do end up using

the skills because there are so many different careers that use a good knowledge of health and wellness," she said. "The other area I do is education and training. Some of those classes, like human development, we were able to get CPR certified. I had a student come back and say she was glad she had taken the class because she had to perform CPR."

Under the Human Ser-

vices tab the other main classes Armbrust teaches are the Food and Wellness I and II classes, which supplied the food at the open house Tuesday.

"We cook every week in those classes, either for themselves for events like this," she said. "Next week the Food II class are making cakes for the National Honor Society Banquet."

Overall, the CTE program

focuses and emphasizes on career education, in order to train students with hands-on learning that helps them apply what they learn and apply it.

"I think we have been very successful here," Pier said. "What we are doing is going to serve these kids after high school and into their working lives."

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