

USD Presents Mel Brooks' 'Young Frankenstein'

BY SARAH WETZEL
For the Plain Talk

Fans of the 1974 Mel Brooks film, *Young Frankenstein* starring Gene Wilder, have the chance to see a classic favorite come to life in musical form over the next few weeks.

The show opens today at 7:30 p.m. and will continue Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon at 2 p.m. The show will also run after Thanksgiving Break on December 2-5 at 7:30 p.m. and December 6 at 2 p.m.

"People who are fans of the movie won't be disappointed because many of the iconic moments and dialogue are in here verbatim from the movie which was certainly intentional when they wrote it for the stage," said director Matt Nesmith. "They will also see some new things as well. There's new music though there is 'Puttin on the Ritz' which is very iconic from the movie. There's obviously a whole new score that folks haven't heard. There's great ensemble and great dance."

According to Nesmith, the show is one big tribute to multiple themes.

"Not only is it like the movie which is satire and parody of the 1930's horror movies, it's also goes back to Mel Brooks as a musician paying homage to the musical styles of the 20's and 30's direct and indirect references to Irving Berlin and Rogers and Hammerstein and many others," he said. "So it is very much a homage to musical theatre in addition to a satire/parody of horror movies. There's really something for everyone. Folks who love Mel Brooks are going to get Mel Brooks. Folks who love classic musical theatre and musical comedy, this is very much a traditional musical comedy in that sense as well. This show has a lot of dancing, strong solos, sing-along and tap-along numbers so you get all that."

The show is appropriate for most ages according to Nesmith.

"I would say it's firmly PG-PG-13," he said. "The sexual references are all innuendo. There's nothing overt. Nothing should be taken too seriously in it. It's very funny, very comedic. All the characters are very accessible. I think there's one swear word in the whole show. My kids have been there for many of the rehearsals. My eight year old enjoyed the dancing and the funny stuff and doesn't get any of the other stuff."

So where does inspiration for direction come from for this show?

"Not so much from the movie but the style," Nesmith said. "It lives in a certain style, the style of musical comedy. It's the style of vaudevillian humor and there's very specific comedic elements that go into those comedies. It's very detailed. We have to teach and direct and act to that style but it's not a Mel Brooks Style per se because he was drawing on those styles. Some things were written in the script to be what they were in the movie. In a comic show like this audiences expect to see those bits so we're doing a disservice both to the script and our audience if we don't honor those moments that are in the script."

Having an iconic film version of a production can make developing your own version of the character difficult in some cases, though Nesmith said it hasn't been a problem for his cast.

"I think you'll find that everyone found their own pretty easily," he said. "A lot of the same gags you see in the movie are in the musical so the lines are the same but you're never going to mistake Braeden for Gene Wilder or Brianna for Madeline Kahn. Everything is different onstage. It has to be scaled up from screen to stage."

Looking to the movie didn't hinder Brianna Adams, however, in developing her character, Elizabeth.



COURTESY PHOTO: USD

The University of South Dakota Department of Theatre presents Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein* Nov. 20-22 and Dec. 2-6 in the Wayne S. Knutson Theatre of the Warren M. Lee Center for the Fine Arts.

"Elizabeth in the movie is very different from Elizabeth in the musical," she said. "It wasn't too difficult for me to separate those two. I think I've had a unique experience with this because Elizabeth is only in five scenes but each scene is a show-stopping song. It has been fun to have the time out of rehearsal to really work on those and really work on the character. It has been great to have that time to really develop the character for me."

The character of Elizabeth is the fiancé to the young Dr. Frederick Frankenstein played by Braeden Garrett.

"Frederick has been such a wonderful role to delve into and learn who he is and embody that and try to give them their own Gene Wilder in a sense but not at the same time, bringing new elements to it through my study of the character," Garrett said.

Both Garrett and Adams see certain personality traits from their characters in themselves which helps in portraying the role convincingly but also giving them a chance to experiment with traits different from themselves.

"I think that Elizabeth is a dramatic exaggeration of myself," Adams said. "She's very sassy and high-maintenance. I think I'm that on a low scale. It's fun to be a heightened reality of myself for a few hours of the show. It's a fun time."

"He's very closed off from a lot of people," Garrett said of his character. "He's not a very liked person. He's very strange but he's also incredibly brilliant and he knows it and flaunts it. That's why he works at the Johns, Miriam

and Anthony Hopkins School of Medicine. He knows students are trying to get into his class because it's the class students want to get into to learn more about the brain and anatomy and every aspect of it. It's similar because many teachers that I've taken study of who are teachers where students are trying to get into those classes, I've looked at their mannerisms how they walk, talk and how they use their hands and so I've used that a lot. In terms of how it relates to me, he's an odd guy and he says stuff that he thinks is funny sometimes that might not always be funny. I say things that I think are very funny to myself and they aren't as funny as I thought they'd be."

Both actors expressed satisfaction at finally seeing all the pieces come together after weeks of rehearsal.

"I think that putting it all together has been fun, being able to see all the parts flow together," Adams said. "That really shows off the comedic timing of the show and how funny it really is. I think crew view was the best part because we finally had an audience to laugh at us. Crew view is when the crew comes and watches the show before."

The music is recorded which is both helpful and detrimental according to Adams.

"We've had it since day one," she said. "We've known exactly what it was going to be but then you have to play with their vamps and how long they hold this and that and whatever. It has been good to have it from the start but it's frustrating to have to be exactly the same every time."

Challenges aside, the cast and crew has high hopes for the show.

"I hope that people have a fun time," Adams said. "I hope they laugh their butts off because it's a really funny show. I hope that I can bring them joy for a few hours."

Garrett agrees.

"It's going to be exactly what they expect and so much more," he said. "We have fun. We do what we do to give people a break from their lives and we work very hard just like everybody else in a different way. We understand the grips and pains that people go through. This show has a lot of grips and pains that people go through and it's about one centralized commotion that happens that can affect an entire town. You can come together at the very end and realize that nothing is really bad. It can relate to a lot of real-world situations."

This show is one of many over the years purposefully chosen for the benefit of the students in the cast as well as enjoyment for the community according to Nesmith.

"Every year we do the same process," he said. "All the faculty submit shows and we as a faculty discuss and choose our season. We try in a four year period to get a representative of samples of as many different styles and genres as possible. Everything from rock musicals to classical musical comedy to cutting edge things. We had the very contemporary *Next to Normal* last year but we've also done very traditional dramas like *Brigadoon* a couple of years ago. We try to be well rounded and diverse so we were in line for a musical comedy."

This is Nesmith's first experience with this show, not having performed in or directed it before.

"I've had a great time," he said. "[The actors] have been very focused and deliberate. I think they love the high energy and what they're learning in terms of comedy and style and a new respect for Mel Brooks. I think that audiences are going to be very impressed with the specificity, the style and the high level of professionalism and also honoring the Mel Brooks style. We want to be true to that."

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