

USD Theatre Presents 'Venus In Fur'

BY SARAH WETZEL
For the Plain Talk

For those who enjoy smaller and non-conservative theatre, the University of South Dakota's Theatre department is offering a unique experience this weekend by presenting 'Venus in Fur.'

The production opened last night and will continue tonight, Saturday and Monday at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. in the Arena Theatre in the Fine Arts Center on the USD campus.

"I really enjoyed that it's a blend of comedy and something to say," said director and graduate student Rebecca Bailey. "It allows us to laugh at things and enjoy ourselves but it has some meat to it and it has something to offer it at the same time. "It is a sexy, fast-paced comedy. There are definitely some darker things in there but there is quite a bit of comedy in this show. That's what really drew me to the piece is that combination of things."

Another unique aspect of the show is there are only two actors locked in an acting marathon.

"There are only two people in the show," Bailey said. "It's just two people for the entire production, about 100 minutes. It's just stop and go and they never leave stage."

Christa Gesicki and Kit Asfeldt are the stars of the show and have earned their spot on stage according to Bailey.

"They have worked so hard," she said. "They are so amazing. Those are really challenging roles."

Gesicki, a Junior majoring in musical theatre and minoring in dance from Broomfield, Colorado, plays a young actress showing up for an audition.

Asfeldt, a Senior BFA Musical Theatre major with a minor in Communication Sciences and Disorders, plays the put-together director auditioning for a play based on the 1870's book Venus in Fur.

"It is the audition of a lifetime," Bailey said. "By the end of it I'm not sure if you know who's auditioning for who. It's something that could only happen in a rehearsal room under those settings with an actor and a director."

The plot also deals with a play within a play as the two characters act out scenes as part of the audition.

"It has a combination of this actor and director story and the



SARAH WETZEL/FOR THE PLAIN TALK
Graduate directing student Rebecca Bailey is excited to present 'Venus in Fur' this weekend, a sharp, sexy comedy guaranteed to keep you interested.

story that comes out of his 1870's novel," Bailey said. "It's very Victorian feeling."

Such an interesting premise is sure to bring challenges as Bailey has discovered.

"It's a challenge and an opportunity all at the same time," she said. "It's a challenge how to take care of two people that are going to be onstage for 100 minutes without a break in heels for her, serious heels and lingerie for the majority of the show. It's definitely got adult content. It looks at adult themes in a very comedic way."

Strong viewer discretion is advised for this production according to Bailey as she describes the play as PG-13 to rated-R for language, lingerie, sexual references and serious moments.

"The themes that it's looking at are really adult oriented," she said. "There's a lot of gender power roles, those kinds of things. In an incredibly comedic way. It's a lot of fun. You're not going to sit the whole time deep in thought. You're going to be laughing. The ending of it and the way the play is set up is very ambiguous. It leaves a lot for the audience to consider, at least I hope it does. My hope for this is that it leaves audiences with a little bit to think about with what actually happens at the end of this play. That's exciting for me. That was a challenge to create that. Ives leaves a lot open for the director."

Lucky for Bailey, she landed two actors that came in with some strengths befitting to the challenges of the play.

"The fun of having two actors is you have a real chance to build a relationship between them," she said. "Humorously enough the two actors I have are roommates. They have this great rapport with each other coming into it which was nice because this play, like I said, is fun and earthy and whatnot but it deals with a lot of mature themes and needs actors that are comfortable with each other."

The play, set in modern-day New York, takes more than one twist and turn according to Bailey.

"I think it feels very earthy and modern in a lot of ways," she said. "It really feels very contemporary and comedic and all of those things. It just takes a twist down a darker road. The play is set in modern times. The play within the play is Victorian so we have a lot of references to that but by the end of that play the realities begin to blend and by the end you're never really sure which reality you're in if that makes sense."

As the play begins the actress enters for her audition.

"She wants the part and she's five hours late for her audition," Bailey said. "She's carrying a bag full of props that's bigger than she is and a broken umbrella and everything and you've got this very put-together man who's maybe a

little thinking too highly of himself. He's the adaptor of the play. He's put together this masterpiece he's certain. You have these two force just collide in this audition room and they bring to life parts of the play and those characters start to blend with the characters of the play."

So why such a small play in an educational setting like USD?

"We strive to offer a variety of opportunities," Bailey said. "This is an arena show which is our smaller stage. It's in our black box theater which is an amazing situation because you can transform it. This play takes place in the thrust. It's a partial thrust so it kind of has a back set but then it comes out into the audience."

The term 'in the thrust' as Bailey demonstrated means a stage area that juts out into the audience but also has a backdrop so not quite qualifying as theatre in the round.

The smaller, more intimate space will seat about 68.

There is plenty for all the theatre students to participate in according to Bailey.

"A lot of students have been involved in this with design work," she said. "It's mostly student designed. Our students designed the set and the props. Our costumes and lights were faculty. A lot of students are involved in the technical aspect of the piece. As far as acting right now we have Young Frankenstein going on which is a huge demand on people. We auditioned for the shows together. People were considered for both shows and it was pulled so people working on this show weren't working on Young Frankenstein. Our rehearsals overlap. We're rehearsing Venus in Fur and I can hear music for Young Frankenstein down the hall."

"There are lots of opportunities with things moving through," Bailey continued. "We just closed Bus Stop which was a larger straight show so that had a fair number of students in that show. So there's a balance in what we're offering."

The experience of working on such a small show is an educational experience itself.

"This style of acting, to rehearse in such a small setting for two actors for that extent and to have such deep character development that happens in a play where you're really right there for those two people and you're making all the little choices that happen for those two, that's a

very different style of acting than Young Frankenstein," Bailey said. "So we're giving opportunities in different places for growth of our students. Then it also serves growth of our directors because I'm a graduate student. I'm in grad school here doing my MFA in directing. So it also serves the choices for me to direct."

Having directed larger shows such as 'Into the Woods' previously, Bailey said this type of directing is a new educational experience for her as well.

"They wanted me to have a chance to work on something smaller where I can hone in and really focus in on some of the details where I'm not people-managing and blocking large scenes but where I'm really looking at the details and having the time, because I'm only working with two actors, to really build that relationship between the two of them," she said. "So this show is really different in that situation and in that opportunity for our actors and for the director. I've done small shows before but never two people for 100 minutes. That's a marathon for two people. It's a really active show. The furniture moves, the people are moving, we're up on things, there's a pole in the middle of the set. We're everywhere. It's a really physical and active show. People aren't going to fall asleep. It's going to keep you moving."

With two such interesting flushed-out characters, it's not surprising that this play can hold your attention with only two actors.

"It's really sharp comedy," Bailey said. "David Ives is spot on with it and really great at adding tension into things and keeping you surprised. What I love about this play is we have these big, bold characters and then they're in this Victorian scene and it's really straight and serious. When you think you've had enough of that, bam we're back into the other world. The timing of it is really nice. There's a lot of fun things to discover. It's comedy and sexy and fun and fast paced and full of surprises. I'm excited to see it all come together."

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