



Texas Tech theater explores Lubbock community with season of off-campus settings

By William Kerns / A-J Media Entertainment Editor

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No longer will local theatergoers be comfortable heading to the Maedgen main stage or lab theaters on the Texas Tech campus.

With theatrical improvements being constructed over the next several months, Mark Charney, director of the Tech School of Theatre and Dance, was challenged to find an array of community sites where casts and crews could create entertaining theater. Frankly, Charney was in his element. One might even say he was having fun.

Consider, for example, that the prestigious Tennessee Williams Festival has invited Tech's theater school to take part for several years, and this festival makes a habit of using a mixture of nine found and site-specific settings annually. Plus, Charney was quite emphatic when stating the school's budget would have allowed Tech to simply rent other theaters. However, Charney considers the current situation a valuable part of theatrical training.

After all, he explained, "Students will learn more about what it means to stage plays without optimal conditions, because those who move to other cities likely will be producing plays in storefronts, on wharfs and in houses.

"... Many say theater does not depend on theaters themselves, and so we are trying to prove that."

This was not a last-minute decision. Plays were not chosen first.

"First, we had to locate potential sites for plays," said Charney. "Then, our season selection committee -- already tasked with choosing plays that suit our students, our community, our instruction and our desire to embrace diversity -- had to select plays that made sense within those sites.

“And finally, we had to narrow those lists down to theaters that best represents our mission to educate and cross boundaries.”

He would later state, “Man, it was challenging to choose plays that fit our aesthetic, served the students and the community, and gave us great roles.”

Mind you, one play seemed like a snap. “Hands on a Hardbody,” a musical inspired by the film documentary about 10 down-on-their-luck Texans hoping to win a Nissan truck by continuing to keep one hand on the vehicle for the longest period of time, will be staged at McGavock Nissan, 6312 Milwaukee Ave., in mid-October.

On the other hand, the season will open with a period drama, set in 1930s Hollywood. “Of Beauty Queens and Childhood Dreams” is directed by Kevan Dunkelberg, 32, a third-year graduate student in the master of fine arts performance and pedagogy program. Using found-space settings, he said, may be ambitious and a great learning opportunity, but he added, “It’s always a little nerve-wracking to be the first one into the pool.”

His play, after all, will kick off Tech’s 2018-19 season on Sept. 24-30 at the Christine Devitt Icehouse, 511 Ave. J, which, when relatively empty, “feels to me very much like an empty sound stage from a bygone era,” Dunkelberg said.

Others include George Brant’s “Elephant’s Graveyard,” in which circus troop members revive a story about an elephant being hung out of vengeance, a play being performed in the round at the Tech Equestrian Center, 5712 CR 1500 -- and the rock musical “Bloody, Bloody Andrew Jackson,” a comedic parody staged at the National Ranching Heritage Center, 3121 Fourth St. Tech’s dance faculty will be showcased in “DanceTech” at the Charles Adams Studio Project, 602 Ave. J.

“Passing,” says Charney, “is about race, gender passing for someone you aren’t, identity.” The play also speaks to art and will be staged in one of the studios at LHUCA, 511 Ave. K.

That said, Charney had hoped the Museum of Texas Tech also could be used, only to discover it was not viable because of the added expense of hiring security guards to protect the art after hours.

Again, Charney views primarily positives, although he mentioned early on, “Now we are into renting generators, thinking of inventive lighting sources and figuring out whether we rent porta-potties. ... With risk comes reward.”

He loves the idea of “establishing new community partners and taking theater where it’s not been taken before. New audiences. New spaces. Exciting opportunities.”

Charney may not view these as negatives, but he does recognize extra work demanded to achieve extra solutions. He asked, “How do we find electricity? How do we protect lighting instruments from dust? Will folks make the trek to places as far away as the Equestrian Center? Will audiences object to theater in parking lots and tents? How will weather affect us?

“Will our students be able to project and protect their voices? ... Rachel Hirshorn-Johnstone, our dialect and vocal coach, will help train students to perform in spaces that do not house musical theater.”

Audience capacity will drop to between 80 and 200 per show. Reserved seats are available only for those buying season packages at (806) 742-3603: \$45 for four shows, \$60 for six shows and \$90 for a nine-show package. Individual tickets for all shows except the RROAPS one-acts and the RRADS dance spectacular are \$15 for the general public and \$5 for students with valid IDs.