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Kansas Classical Repertory Theatre set to debut this weekend

July 9, 2014

The Kansas Classical Repertory Theatre will kick off its inaugural season Friday evening with “The Boys From Syracuse” at Kansas University’s Murphy Hall.

The musical — along its source material, William Shakespeare’s “The Comedy of Errors” — will be performed in rotation throughout the rest of July.

Built around the theme of translation and adaptation, the company will utilize the same cast and set for both productions.

“The stories are told in a similar way, but also there’s comparisons that you can make back and forth,” said John Staniunas, a professor of theater at KU and director of “The Boys From Syracuse.” “I think it’s interesting and fascinating because you don’t often see the original material to see how a musical gets made.”

It’s an ambitious undertaking that distinguishes KCRT from other theater companies in the region, said Peter Zazzali, director of “The Comedy of Errors.”

Zazzali and others behind the newly formed KCRT hope to provide Lawrence with its own professional theater company.

“Nobody else is doing rotating repertory. It’s expensive,” said Zazzali, who is also an assistant professor of theater at KU. “You’re trying to accomplish twice the amount of work with the resources that you normally would have for one particular production.”

“The Boys From Syracuse,” which originally made its debut in the 1930s, will be staged in a “Victorian steampunk” setting in Staniunas’ interpretation. (Think mechanical “clocks, cogs and wheels,” he said.) Zazzali, meanwhile, envisioned his production as a nod to commedia dell’arte, a form of improvised comedy popular in Italy during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Both “The Comedy of Errors” and “The Boys From Syracuse” tell the story of two sets of identical twins who, after being accidentally separated at birth, are brought together years later after a series of wild mishaps relating to mistaken identities.

Shakespeare’s play, written in the late 1500s, is itself based loosely on another work — “The Menaechmi,” by the Roman playwright Plautus.

Despite their ancient origins, Staniunas said the plays still retain a timeless feel.

“I think whenever you do something like this, what makes it fresh is that the human experience doesn’t really change,” he said. “We fall in love, we mistake people for other people — just the experience of romantic love, the idea that it takes a lot to be in relationship, that life throws you a lot of curveballs and you have to deal with them as they come along.”

To purchase tickets and see this season’s schedule, visit KUTheatre.com.



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Round and round

September 17, 2014 Rock Chalk Review 0 Comments

Rotating repertory challenges student actors, faculty directors

by Steven Hill



Peter Zazzali and John Staniunas say the dozen or so actors who performed in the new Kansas Classical Repertory Theatre company's inaugural season this summer met the kind of challenge that helps create careers on the stage.

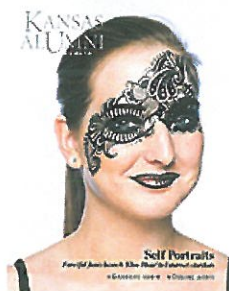
Performing in two plays—"The Comedy of Errors" and "The Boys from Syracuse"—at the same time, the actors had to learn multiple roles for very different theatre styles.

"They have to have the abilities to do Shakespeare and a musical, which are two of the most difficult things to do in theatre," says Staniunas, professor of theatre and director of "The Boys

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from Syracuse," a 1938 musical based on Shakespeare's comedy of mistaken identity. "You're singing and dancing and using verse. It takes chops, and it gives them what I call 'railroad tracks.' If they can do this, they're going to have the ability to do a lot of other things."

"There's no greater test," adds Zazzali, assistant professor of theatre and director of "The Comedy of Errors." "It gets schizophrenic. Not only because you're in two different productions, but those two different productions are different worlds, different styles."

Repertory theatre—a company of actors performing a series of plays, opening and closing one production before moving on to the next—is fairly common in the theatre world. Less common is rotating repertory, where multiple plays are all open simultaneously.

Less common still is rotating rep in which the plays share the same set, as the KU company's productions did throughout July at the Crafton-Preyer Theatre in Murphy Hall. "The Boys from Syracuse," by Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart and George Abbott, opened July 11; Staniunas transplanted the 1930s musical comedy to a Victorian "steampunk" setting. The play it's based on, Shakespeare's "The Comedy of Errors," opened July 12; Zazzali staged his production of the Shakespeare classic in homage to commedia dell'arte, which has origins in 16th-century Italy.

Rehearsals were intense.

"The actors were running back and forth from one rehearsal to another, having to change their game and working with two directors who work in very different ways," Staniunas says.

The creation of the Kansas Classical Repertory Theatre is part of University Theatre's push to professionalize its summer offerings. Half of the company consisted of KU students, and half were students from professional actor training programs. The Jayhawks are mostly recent graduates.

"This is the last thing they'll do here," Staniunas says. "So it's their first professional gig." The theatre hired one professional equity actor and hopes to build on that number in future. The BFA and MFA students from the professional programs have a lot of production experience as well. The result is a "mature, professional quality" experience, according to Staniunas.

"It's really raised the game for everybody," Zazzali says, "especially for our KU students, to be exposed to that sort of company."

The directors count themselves among those pushed to raise their game by the rotating repertory format.

"Rotating repertory is just so challenging and demanding," Zazzali says. "You're trying to accomplish twice as much with the resources that would generally go to just one production. But it can be doubly rewarding for the audience, in this case especially so because the shows have very closely related narratives that are told in very different ways."

Kansas Classical Repertory Theatre will perform every July, providing some structure to the theatre department's summer offerings.

"When you're starting anew each summer, it's always difficult to decide, 'Well, what should we do now?'" Staniunas says. "Now we've got a sort of charter as to where we want to take the summer."

Photograph by Steve Puppe

Tags: 5.15, John Staniunas, KU, Peter Zazzali, University of Kansas