

OV musical heads outside

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Gunnar Tinsman jumps in the air during the opening number “Rotten to the Core” in a rehearsal of Disney’s “Descendants” on Tuesday at Otter Valley Union High School in Brandon. The Otter Valley Union Walking Stick Theatre will perform outside this year at Markowski Field.

PHOTO BY JON OLENDER

BRANDON — For its next production, Otter Valley Union High School’s Walking Stick Theatre is going big.

The troupe will stage an outdoor production of Disney’s “Descendants: The Musical” beginning May 29.

The musical comedy tells the story of what happens when the children of Disney’s greatest villains are offered the choice between learning to be good or following in their parents’ wicked footsteps.

OVU theater instructor Jeff Hull said he selected the show because it could be easily adapted to multiple formats — live and in-person, streamed or recorded — making it ideal given the uncertainty of planning group events during the pandemic.

Rehearsals for the cast of more than 30, including several students from Neshobe Elementary School who round out the cast of younger characters, began in March.

Hull and the crew of 10 have also been busy constructing the massive set, which will be assembled on Markowski Field behind the high school.

“It’s a much bigger stage than we’re used to,” said Hull.

He said the planning for the production has been a “long process.”

In addition to rehearsals and set construction, the cast had to prerecord all their singing parts. Hull said it was, technically speaking, the best option given the outside venue and the fact that the cast must still wear face masks. He noted that all dialogue will still be performed live.

“Descendants” is more physical than past productions, according to Hull.

“We’re able, this year, to really focus on the choreography a lot more than we have in the past,” he said.

Junior Gunnar Tinsman thinks that’s a good thing.

“It’s really fun to be able to have the whole cast onstage for more numbers and get to challenge ourselves with more dancing and more difficult dancing,” said Tinsman, who plays Jay, the son of Jafar from “Aladdin.”

Senior Sydney Singh, who plays Evie, daughter of the Evil Queen from “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” agrees.

“I think it’s the best dancing I have seen in all the musicals (we’ve done). Everyone’s really putting their all into it,” she said.

Kenyon said performing outside on such a big stage will give the show a different feel.

“Going out onto the football field and just transitioning out there, it really hits you just how big (it) is,” he said. “It’s really a big adaptation, but I feel like it’s really going to benefit us in ways because we’re able to really go all out with movement without having to worry about being too close to other people.”

Senior Casey McMullen, the production’s dance captain, said performing in a larger space was an interesting challenge.

“It gives a different effect. It’s a nice change,” said McMullen, who also plays the role of Ben, the son of Belle and the Beast from “Beauty and the Beast” and the show’s hero who offers the villainous children a chance at redemption.

Singh said having the audience seated in bleachers looking down on the stage creates a “different experience than what you would get in the auditorium.”

Hull described the space as feeling almost like an amphitheater.

Despite being outside, he said COVID guidelines are still keeping the audience size to 250 people per show — about 100 fewer than normal productions, but more than would have been allowed a month ago, he noted.

He added that performances will be limited to matinees because it wasn’t possible to properly light the show outside at night.

Choreography and sets aside, McMullen said this show has given the cast the opportunity to do things they haven’t been able to do onstage before.

Among those things, according to Tinsman, are pyrotechnics.

“There’s at least a few places where in the background we’re going to have like some sort of explosion going on,” he said.

But, by far, the most exciting part of the production for the cast is getting to perform together for an audience again.

Sophomore Andrew Kenyon, who plays Carlos, the son of Cruella De Vil from “One Hundred and One Dalmatians,” said he was happy to finally be back onstage with his friends.

“It’s been a year since I’ve seen these guys. It’s really nice being able to get the gang back together and have fun,” he said.

Senior Chloe Fuller, who plays Mal, the daughter of Maleficent from “Sleeping Beauty,” said she has enjoyed how collaborative rehearsals have been, noting that the cast has been working together to help each other figure out their parts.

“I think we’ve all just been so starved for interaction,” she said. “It’s just been nice to be around people again.”

“After coming back from the quarantine, we’ve all kind of come together as one group,” Tinsman said, calling it “an amazing experience.”

The cast hopes the audience feels that excitement, too.

“I can’t wait to show everybody that we’re still here, and we’re still able to give it our all and let people have a good time,” said Kenyon.

Otter Valley Union High School presents Disney’s “Descendants: The Musical” at 2:30 p.m. May 29 and 30, and June 5 and 6 at Markowski Field. Tickets are \$10 each. Visit bit.ly/ovu-tix-2021 to reserve in-person tickets. In the event of rain, performances will be pushed back to later in the day. The musical will also be streamed online at 7 p.m. June 11 and at 2:30 and 7 p.m. June 12. Tickets are \$15 each. Visit bit.ly/ovu-stream-tix to reserve streaming tickets.