

Otter Valley spring musical to be performed al fresco

Pandemic compelled director and students to learn to create theatre in different ways

By JOSIE GAWRYS

BRANDON — Otter Valley Union High School's Walking Stick Theatre group will be performing Disney's "Descendants" musical this spring — but not in their standard theater. The show will be performed live at Markowski Field behind the school, a decision made by theater department director Jeff Hull.

"Ever since they built (the field) several years ago, I always thought that would be such a great place to do a show," said Hull, noting the field's resemblance to a Greek amphitheater with its lowered field and raised seating.

Disney's "Descendants: The Musical" is a one-act musical comedy based on the Disney Channel's "Descendants" trilogy featuring its hit songs and characters. In the present-day kingdom of Auradon all of Disney's beloved heroes and royalty are living happily ever after and safe from the troublesome villains and sidekicks they have banished to the magic-free Isle of the Lost. That is until Ben, the benevolent teenage son of Belle and King Adam (The Beast), offers a chance at redemption for the troublemaking offspring of

the vilest villains.

The children of Maleficent, Cruella DeVil, and Jafar are welcomed to Auradon Prep to attend school with the children of their parents' sworn enemies. Now they have a difficult choice to make: follow in their parents' wicked footsteps or learn to be good.

There had never been a good time to use Markowski Field for theatre before, Hull said, but with COVID guidelines making live indoor performances a no-go, the opportunity presented itself. And the football and soccer field will be transformed into an outdoor musical theatre showcase.

"This just seemed like an obvious fit, to be able to do it outside on the field," Hull said. "We are not building a stage. We are using the actual field and sun-folding to move a few larger set pieces that create the building structure and then just carry on the smaller pieces. We are setting up a whole sound system each day, though."

Much like everything since the COVID-19 pandemic began, it's a change from the other shows the school's theatre program has performed. In the fall,

happy to see their involvement. The short plays included a murder mystery, an exploration of LGBTQ+ issues, challenges with social media, and even a ghost summoning. The final piece in their livestream was the senior project titled "Ebb and Flow," which consisted of student-written monologues exploring their struggles and anxieties during the pandemic.

Parent Devon Fuller emphasized the significance of Hull giving students this opportunity in a letter to the editor of *The Reporter* last week.

"He gave them an outlet for their COVID-induced stress and a life lesson on how to deal with adversity," Fuller wrote.

The students showed a wide range of feelings about the pandemic in that performance. Some said they felt scared and helpless, some mourned the loss of a normal senior year, others spoke about the challenges of online learning, and many touched on difficult feelings of isolation and emptiness. However, it was their passion for theatre and creativity that is connecting the students to each other and helping them through the pandemic.

"Words are hard, especially

now. But I'm for certain of one thing, and that's being creative," said senior Emma Rowe during the performance.

Both the fall play and the recent short plays this winter incorporated some unique filming techniques that wouldn't have been possible in a live stage performance. Hull explained that exploring different mediums for showcasing their work in a COVID-safe way led to learning experiences for both him and the students.

"Everything I have done this year has been leading us to be able to produce some sort of live performance musical," Hull said.

Students have been learning and adapting to a lot of new skills, including video auditing, pre-recorded music, and acting for the camera. Hull says it's helped the actors take more ownership of their work.

"That never would have happened if we hadn't been in this situation, which I think is great, because kids have gotten better," he said.

Otter Valley's Walking Stick Theatre will be performing "Descendants: The Musical" live at Markowski Field on May 29 and 30, June 5 and 6, and virtually on June 11 and 12.