

'The Music Man Jr.' boasts a large and talented cast

Daily Herald Staff Report

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Children's Theatre of Elgin will stage "The Music Man Jr." this weekend. The play is a slightly abridged version of the original.

Director Jen Prise of Elgin, director, and producer Stephanie Kleba of Campton Hills took a few moments from their busy rehearsal schedule to answer some questions about the production and what it's like to guide nearly 80 youngsters through the process of preparing for and performing a lively musical.

Q. Why did you choose "Music Man" as your fall play?

A. "Music Man" was chosen by our Children's Advisory Board. This is a small group of students recommended each year by board members, producers, and directors. As a representative student body, they participate in script reading, group discussions, and offer recommendations related to the coming theater season.

Q. How big is the cast? What is the age range of the cast members involved?

A. We have 76 students in second through ninth grades, who come from all over the Fox Valley area and beyond. Is it a coincidence that one of the big show numbers is "76 Trombones"? Well, let's say that it just turned out that way.

Q. How do students become involved in CTE; do they typically take classes or just try out for the roles?

A. CTE offers periodic workshops, but it is not necessary to take a class before auditioning. The Web site is a terrific resource for students interested in auditioning - cteelgin.com.

Q. What roles do parent volunteers play in the productions?

A. Parents volunteer many hours building sets and painting, measuring and sewing, planning, ordering and baking goods for concessions, cast parties, etc. These wonderful parents act as a backbone.

Q. Why did you decide to add a Thursday evening performance?

A. This performance appeals to individuals who have weekend conflicts or out-of-town commitments. In the past we have offered a Saturday matinee with special group rates. This Thursday night performance is similar to that type of show, because it encourages groups to attend, due to the special rate of \$7 a seat for 20 or more.

Q. Are the songs in this play a challenge for the kids? How about the dance numbers?

A. The music in this show is truly classic and the musical integrity cannot be ignored. It shows the talent of our students; by highlighting some high female ranges, challenging the guys with periodic instances of four part harmony, and running differing melodies simultaneously in numbers such as Pick-A-Little. The dances are fresh and new and a bit challenging with marching band formations, jumps and lifts, and even a lyrical number.

Q. What are some of the challenges involved in portraying a full range of character development in a shortened production?

A. With such an iconic show and many preconceptions, we first told the children to not watch the movie. So much of the action is "adult" for 1912, but transfers to 2009 with our teenagers. Marion is a 26-year-old librarian, but is finding her first love as many of our high school cast members are. Harold is having a crisis of conscience while trying to find a place to belong. Who among us has not felt that way?

Q. What do the kids get out of being involved in CTE? What do you, as a director or producer, get out of it?

A. This theater is known for developing students' confidence and comfort with the stage. Students learn important life skills like public speaking and the ability to laugh at oneself. Over the course of a show, we do see students becoming better actors, singers and dancers, but from the kids' perspective, they look back and speak of the close friendships they have made.

We as producers and directors get to see the sparkle in their eyes and the bright smiles on their faces. Isn't that what it is all about?

Q. What do you think will be the audience's favorite part or parts of the show?

A. We hope the audience will enjoy the whole show, but longtime favorites have always included the Pick-a-ladies, "76 Trombones," and the beautiful love song "Till There Was You."

If you go

What: Children's Theatre of Elgin's production of "The Music Man Jr."

When: 7 p.m. today, Friday and Saturday, Oct. 22-24; 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 25

Where: The Hemmens, 45 Symphony Way, Elgin

How much? \$10 adults, \$8 children; group discounts available for opening night

Details: Call (847) 931-5900 or visit cteelgin.com

'Music Man Jr.' students share thoughts

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Student actors in "The Music Man Jr." share their thoughts on what it's like to perform with Children's Theatre of Elgin.

Hannah Schutzkus, Elgin: Hi, my name is Hannah Schutzkus. I am an eighth-grader at St. Laurence Catholic School in Elgin. I have been in 20 CTE shows.

I started in first grade when my sister encouraged me to audition in "Showstoppers IV" in the summer of 2001. I enjoyed it immensely and decided to audition for my second show, which happened to be "The Music Man Jr." directed by Eric Langmeyer. I was cast as a townsperson/band member and immediately loved the show. My sister, Katie, was a pick-a-little lady, and my brother, Alex, was Winthrop Paroo.

This previous summer, I was asked to participate in the Children's Theatre's Board, which chooses shows for the spring and fall. I knew that I wanted to perform "Music Man Jr." again. This time, I was cast as a pick-a-little lady, which was my sister's old part.

I delight in comparing the shows and the current roles with their predecessors. It is amazing to be given the privilege of working with the director, Jen Prise, and the fellow principals, especially the pick-a-little ladies, Janine Martin, Taylor Edwards, Paige Shockey, and Jocelyn Vanderwiel. I find this part a delight, as it is both humorous and challenging to perform.

I think the show, which takes place in 1912 in River City Iowa, is a classic that has catchy music and a captivating plot.

Maddie Hayes, 12, Elgin: This has been an amazing show. "Music Man" is such a great production, but to have an awesome cast to put it onstage makes it even better.

I love the theater so much. Even after 12 productions with Children's Theatre of Elgin, I still look forward to rehearsal every night. All of what goes on is such an extraordinary opportunity for me and everyone else in the show. Not only is it fun, but it gives you character. CTE - or even theater in general - gives you the confidence to stand out and helps you think a little outside the box!

Courtney Bender, 11, South Elgin: I can't wait to perform in "Music Man Jr.!" We have wonderful people making this show possible, so many I couldn't possibly name them all. They include our vocal instructor, choreographer, director, cast, and especially all the parents. The show's biggest number, "76 Trombones," is a special treat with many great formations and steps. As another special feature, we have 76 kids performing in the show. I along with others love performing on the stage, and hope you enjoy watching the show as much as us. So come to the brilliant "Music Man!"