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Broadway in Boulder presents "The Secret Garden"

Mark Collins
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During the past five months, members of the production team in Broadway in Boulder's "The Secret Garden" have gotten to know each other well.

It's a large group of theater artists, a mix of professionals and students drawn from several different arts organizations and 19 different middle schools, high schools and colleges in the area.

But what may be most unusual about the production, which opens Friday at the Black Box Theatre in CU's ATLAS Center, are its technical aspects.

"As an actor, the tech for this show is inspiring," said Ty Olwin, 18, who plays Archibald Craven in the musical. "You get in there and see all the tech that's happening and you say, 'I really want to be good.' It's really pumping up the cast."

The production takes advantage of the ATLAS Center's state-of-the-art technology. All the scenery in the two-act musical, set on a lush, 19th-century British estate, is digitally produced.

Three 14-foot screens frame part of the theater's playing space. Onto the screens, technicians project images that have been created by a team of local animators and matte painters in Frankfurt, Germany.

"We've set up the basic geometry of all the sets ... and also made sure the depth of the scene is there," said Andy Gerding, a student at Rocky Mountain College of Art and Design in Denver, and one of three animators on the production team.

Using a software program that animators at film studios like Pixar use, they next added doorknobs, dressers and other detail to the scenery.

"Then we sent it off to these two guys in Germany who made it look pretty," Gerding said.

The matte painters in Germany, from CryTek, a company that's made a name for itself in the gaming industry, used a digital pad and stylus pen to add color to the scene and sent the files back to Boulder.

The result is an impressive series of backdrops, interiors and landscapes that frame the action on stage.

"We wanted to keep a fairy tale feel to it, so we didn't want it to be too photo-realistic," said Angela Gaylor, co-director of the show.

The musical, based on the 1909 novel of the same name, is about a sour young girl, Mary, who grows up privileged in India. When her parents die from cholera, she's sent to live with her uncle in Britain.

When Mary learns there's a secret garden somewhere on her uncle's estate, she sets about to find it and her personality begins to transform.

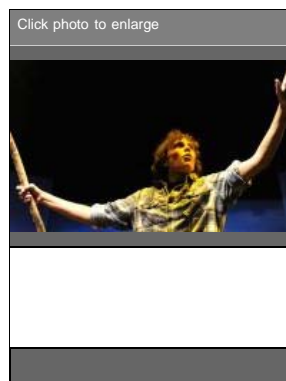
The local show's 14-piece orchestra, conducted by Keynes Chen and made up of musicians from the Boulder Youth Symphony and Flatirons String Academy, are stationed in a room down the hall from the theater. Their efforts are broadcast into the theater via a sound system.

Chen watches the actors on a screen in the music room. The actors can follow Chen from a screen behind the audience in the theater.

The show will also feature costumes worn by actors in the original 1991 Broadway version of the musical. Gaylor and partner David Ayers, who run Broadway in Boulder, the musical theater arm of Parlando School for the Arts, called in a favor from their days in New York City to secure the costumes.

The local actors have gotten a kick out of seeing names of the Broadway actors like Mandy Patinkin and Daisy Eagan -- she won a Tony for playing Mary -- sewn into the costume pieces, Ayers said.

The 30 student performers also worked with theater pros from Broadway and beyond during the rehearsal process as part of a series of Director's Labs, sponsored by the ATLAS Center and Broadway in Boulder earlier this spring. They included sessions with a casting director from Disney Theatricals, a designer from Cirque du Soleil and two Tony Award-winning directors.



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Olwin, a recent graduate of Boulder High, who's heading to the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music in the fall, said working with Broadway musical director Kevin Stites ("Les Miserables") made an especially big impression on him.

"He literally changed the way I think about singing," Olwin said. "He showed the amount of work that goes into Broadway singing. We got a taste of what it might be like later in our careers. It was mind-blowing."

One cast member in "The Secret Garden" may get a taste of Broadway sooner rather than later. Elise Legendre, 11, of Boulder is one of two actors playing Mary. (Lead roles are double cast, and actors will alternate performances).

She recently earned a callback for the role of Jane Banks in the Broadway production of "Mary Poppins." Legendre will travel for her callback audition during the early part of "The Secret Garden's" run.

(Legendre was actually cast as one of two Mary's in the local production after an original cast member, Aida Neitenbach, had to leave the show when she earned the role of Jane Banks in the national tour of "Mary Poppins.")

While a big opportunity looms, Legendre's focus is on playing Mary in Boulder.

"It's been so fun," she said. "I'm so excited to be working with (the cast). They're the nicest people I've ever met."

Once local schools ended their spring semesters, she and the rest of the production team ramped up their already demanding rehearsal schedule. The final week included some 12-hour days.

Gerding and the tech staff began adding the digital imagery to the set during rehearsals in mid-May. It infused the cast with a new energy, Olwin said.

"Definitely, the set has taken the show to a new level," he said.

Contact Camera Theater Critic Mark Collins at 303-473-1369 or BDCTheater@comcast.net.

VIDEO: THE SECRET GARDEN PLAY JUNE 2009

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