



RUN RIGHT DOWN TO SEE THIS SHOW RIGHT NOW! To quote my students, "This show is ridiculous, and we laughed so hard." Like a farce on speed, DISASTER! is like riding a freight train over rough terrain, hanging on for dear life until the engineer finally puts on the brakes. This show is so nutritionally dense, you will want to consume it more than once. No laugh is unmined here. Every beat is crammed with hilarity. If you don't laugh when you see this show, you need to have your humorous attended to.

The show's creator, **Seth Rudetsky**, of Sirius XM Radio fame, had an idea back in 1992 to write a disaster musical. He worked with **Drew Geraci** to develop a musical in the spirit of all those crazy 70s disaster films, like Airport, The Poseidon Adventure, Earthquake, Jaws, and Towering Inferno. The jukebox musical used the NYC Blackout of 1977 as the backdrop for a collection of popular songs from the time period weaved into a farcical plot. In 2011 Rudetsky was asked to write a show benefiting the nonprofit organization Only Make Believe. He decided to return to his disaster musical idea, and along with **Jack Plotnick**, wrote the first script of Disaster! The show went on to have a life after the benefit, running Off-Off-Broadway, and then an Off-Broadway run. A Broadway production followed, which was directed by Plotnick and opened in March 2016 at the Nederlander Theatre.

Fast forward to Wichita, circa 2019. Artistic Director Rick Bumgardner is intrigued by the show and must wait until our current disaster, the COVID19 Pandemic, is under control before he mounts the show in his theatre. The script and score he receives from licensing company MTI doesn't quite reflect the Broadway version of Disaster! so he gets help from Rudetsky in bringing the show kicking and screaming into the 21st Century. Rudetsky was supposed to come to Wichita opening weekend, see the show, and give a Master Class on 9/11.

Unfortunately for Wichita, Rudetsky is working on a Broadway show, and the show's COVID19 protocol prevented him from traveling. In his stead, we have a delightful recording of Rudetsky that opens the show, which gives us the origin story and highlights the work that he did with Bumgardner to bring the show up to speed.

The comic premise of Disaster!? It's opening night of the Barracuda, an offshore casino and disco in Manhattan circa 1979. Everyone wants to boogie down, and gamble on the faux ship, unaware of the casino's almost nonexistent safety features and the fact that it was built on a fault line. What could go wrong? PLENTY.

There are 19 cast members and they do not stand still for a minute. Leading the inspired lunacy is Craig Green, playing Ted, the "Disaster Expert," who is aboard the Barracuda strictly for scientific observation. Green takes the reins and drives this show to the bitter end. His first song, Hot Stuff, shows us that experts can be sexy, and you shouldn't underestimate them. A little bit later in the show, we meet his love interest Jackie, the casino's ditzy nightclub singer, breathily and delightfully played by Deanne Zogleman. Jackie is in love with the unscrupulous and deliciously sleazy casino owner Tony, portrayed quite handily by **Kipp Simmons**, who is from the theatre scene in Kansas City. To evade Tony, who wants to throw Ted off the ship, Ted ducks into Jackie's number Mockingbird, disguising himself in a ridiculous bird headdress. Green plays the physical comedy to the hilt, to excellent effect, and continues to do so during the rest of the show.

**Christi Moore** is having plenty of fun playing Sister Mary, a sweet, determined nun railing against sin and fighting a serious gambling addiction. Moore wrings every drop of physical comedy from this character, whether she's singing and playing her guitar, finding errant cigarettes on the floor, or having an intimate moment with the slot machine.

Tom Frye and Jenny Mitchell play Maury and Shirley, the mature couple on the ship, the couple that show us what love is really about.

We fall in love with them, and we root for them, and we are dashed when we find out Shirley's devastating secret, even if it is hysterical. Frye and Mitchell have so many lovely and funny moments, but Mitchell steals the show when she tries to help some crew members in dire straits with nothing but the power of tap dance.

No 1970s movie would be complete without a Blaxploitation film character/Disco Diva, and Jaslyn Alexander makes sure that her character Lavora fits the bill entirely. Alexander's singing chops are top notch and extremely exciting here, sounding and acting every bit the disco queen. Every time she opened her mouth to sing, I swooned. During her introductory song The Theme From Mahogany, there is some very inventive choreography going on, and I would advise you to check out the piranhas in the fish tank.

Leading lady, Claire Gehrig, as Marianne, and leading man Sam Warner as Chad, are quite wonderfully matched. Both tall and good looking, with terrific voices, they pull off these preposterous scenarios with grace and aplomb, taking the comedy seriously and playing the action straight in the face of high farce. Even when singing the song Sky High (complete with echo) they manage to keep a straight face, enhancing the absurd proceedings with an earnest, innocent delivery.

To top it all off, the actor playing the twins Ben and Lisa is Kellen Clinton, a young man with a bright future. As Lisa, Clinton speaks in a high-pitched voice, wears a wig with braids, and brings the house down with his rendition of Ben later in the second act when it appears his sibling might perish. When both twins are needed on stage at once, Clinton's attempts at hiding his face into the corner of the set to pitch his voice elsewhere are priceless.

There are so many great nuggets of fun in this play I can't even begin to discuss them here. The laughs are nonstop. Much of that humor is provided by Property Designer, Beth Wise, and Amy Saker. Rarely do I get a chance to give a nod to props, but there were so many outrageous sight gags because of the awesome props. In the opening,

Lavora hides from Sister Mary by standing between two girls eating cotton candy. In a proper sea burial, once, twice, three times, body parts get thrown overboard, only to be grabbed by a greedy shark. Tony swims in the briny deep, thanks to an old Kabuki water sheet device - he is attacked by sharks but is rescued. He sings the finale Hooked On A Feeling with two sharks dangling off his arms. Tiles and dead bodies repeatedly fall from the ceiling.

The Music and Vocal Direction by Steven Rue was great! There was lots of backup singing going on offstage and it was very clean and clear. The band was tasty and tight, and you could hear every note, thanks to the great sound design and live mixing by Porter Jones. There were a million sound cues, and none of them were out of time. Lighting Design by **Arthur Reese** helped us keep track of location, and Set Designer J Branson created a space to accommodate all the action and myriad locations very effectively. Keep an eye out for the spinning logos and giant arch! Costume Designer **Chadwick Armstrong** clothed this huge cast in a harvest gold/avocado green/rust color scheme that screamed the 70s. Standout outfits included club singer Jackie's glittering opening number dress, and Tom Frye's sky-high pant waists. Rick Bumgardner's direction here is pretty tight. The characters are well developed, the bits are brilliant, and the pace is BLISTERING. Choreography by Courtney Wages walks right out of the line-dancing disco and keeps her crowded stage moving in time and evenly spaced.

DISASTER! runs September 9-26, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at 8pm, and Sundays at 2pm. Prices are \$10 for Students, \$25 for Military, and \$30 for the General Public. Tickets can be purchased by calling the box office at 316-265-4400 or going to [roxys.downtown.com](https://roxys.downtown.com), clicking on Shows and tickets and choosing 2021-2022 Season from the dropdown.

Toxic Avenger is up next, running October 7-31. It stars **Christi Moore**, Koko Blanton, Matthew Hale, Ethan Crank, and Levon Mathis.