

# Roxy's new musical 'Disaster!' marries disaster films, '70s soundtrack

BY DAVID BURKE  
Eagle correspondent

Growing up, Seth Rudetsky loved a good disaster.

"When I was a kid, I had all these books on tornadoes and hurricanes and earthquakes. I wanted to be a weatherman," the Broadway bon vivant recalled. "My obsession with that coincided with all those disaster great movies that came out in the '70s - 'Towering Inferno,' 'Swarm.' I was obsessed with them."

Meanwhile, he developed another deep-seeded love: 1970s music.

"I always thought that was just the best music out there," said Rudetsky, 54.

Those two circles began to intersect in the early 1990s when - long before "jukebox musicals" became the norm, he noted - he wanted to create a musical homage to disaster movies, featuring '70s tunes.

The circles finally merged in 2011 when he was asked to create a fundraising show for an



Seth Rudetsky

organization called Only Make Believe, which brings theater to hospitalized children.

He cast friends including Broadway stars Adam Pascal, Roger Bart, Faith Prince and Rachel York, and "Disaster! The Musical" was born.

"It was fun, and it was exactly my dream to surround myself with my friends," he said.

Since that time, Rudetsky's fame has grown. He's the host of "Seth's Big Fat Broadway" and "Seth Speaks" on Sirius/XM satellite radio's On Broadway channel, and with his spouse, James Wesley, he hosts "Stars in the House," which provides online reunions of casts from Broadway musicals, movies and TV series.

"Disaster!" has gained momentum as well, playing at a growing number of theaters nationwide, including Roxy's Downtown in Wichita, where it

opens Thursday night. Rudetsky will be in Wichita to watch a performance of "Disaster!" and host a Q&A: "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Broadway ... but were afraid to ask!" next Saturday, Sept. 11.

Roxy's artistic director Rick Bumgardner, who is directing "Disaster!" simply invited Rudetsky to a performance, and he accepted. Rudetsky and co-writer/director Jack Plotnik were very accessible, Bumgardner said, with Plotnik even loaning him his director's notes.

"He encourages creativity. He encourages making it as cute and as special as possible, so your audience can 'get it,'" Bumgardner said.

Rudetsky said he has only taken up offers to see "Disaster!" three or four times, and the Q&A was a rarity for him as well.

Once "Disaster!" premiered at the fundraiser, Rudetsky said, he knew he had a hit on his hands.

"I knew it was very commercial. It's disaster movies, which are internationally beloved, and '70s music," he said.

"More than regular pop music, I think '70s songs are just classics. One thing I was surprised about was that kids liked it. I thought, well, a lot of the jokes are how the lyrics are twisted to fit into the plot... I was surprised kids appreciated the flat-out comedy of it - and people dying from sharks."

The show premiered Off-Off-Broadway in 2011 and eventually made it to Broadway for a two-month run in 2016.

Rudetsky had help along the way, particularly in securing the performance rights for the 40 songs from the '70s that make up the musical's score.

"The creativity of this show was slotting pre-written songs into a plot that makes sense," he said. "What Jack and I wanted to make sure of was that every single song fit into the scene. It took a lot of work. I don't know I had that in me."

Bumgardner said staging "Disaster!" was made easier with Plotnik's suggestion to keep the sets simple and concentrate on

costumes and props. That includes creating piranhas, sharks, rats and a visual gag in homage to "The Towering Inferno" that Bumgardner guarantees will get a laugh.

"It's way more creative than a traditional show," he said. "It's not outlined what they must do."

"They're in their creative heyday right now, which is wonderful to see," he added.

Bumgardner said neither he nor his cast are nervous because the playwright will be in the audience.

"I'm excited about it. He's so supportive and has been so accessible that any question I've had or any change I've wanted to make, he's been a great resource - which doesn't often happen in the course of doing a show," Bumgardner said. "We're all looking forward to showing him what we can do."

"Disaster!" he said, continues the creative streak Roxy's has had, including successful runs of "Driving Miss Daisy" and "Little Shop of Horrors."

"We cannot let the bar down," he said. "I think they're up to the challenge."

Rudetsky said he's considering other musicals and perhaps a movie

script but hasn't determined what his next creative endeavor might be.

His "Stars in the House" began in March 2020 and proved to be a favorite among pandemic-weary pop culture fans as they got to see Rudetsky and Wesley conversations with Broadway, movie and TV cast reunions, all taking place via Zoom.

Among his favorites were from the casts of "Ragtime" (where he was the substitute pianist during its Broadway run) and "The Producers" (where he was a pianist and conducted the orchestra), as well as the movie "The Goodbye Girl" and the cast of the sketch comedy series "Second City TV."

"A lot of them hadn't seen each other in years and years," he said of his reunions. "It was very heartwarming."

## 'DISASTER! THE CATASTROPHIC '70S MUSICAL'

**When:** Sept. 9-26; performances at 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

**Where:** Roxy's Downtown, 412 1/2 W. Douglas

**Tickets:** \$30, from 316-265-4400 or roxysdowntown.com

**Seth Rudetsky Q&A:** 10 a.m. Saturday, Sept. 11; tickets are \$25, including a free crepe and mimosa