

Teen actor enjoying first role at Roxy's in 'Priscilla, Queen of the Desert'

BY DAVID BURKE
Eagle correspondent

Dancing since he was 3 years old and performing since fourth grade, Keaton Mohr was bitten by the theater bug in his first performance, which was in Wichita Children's Theatre's "Best Christmas Pageant Ever."

"I didn't have a huge part in it, but I had a few lines," the 13-year-old recalled. "I knew it would be cool to have a bigger part in more shows."

Indeed, he was looking forward to roles in "Annie" and "The Wizard of Oz," the latter for Music Theatre Wichita, in 2020. "COVID came along and ruined everything," he said. "This year, I finally got back into it."

And in a big way: He's the lone youngster in the cast of "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert," which opens May 5 at Roxy's Downtown.

"It's a lot of fun - I really enjoy it," he said. "They're all really welcoming here, and it's a lot of fun because they're all professionals and it's good for me learning how they've done it in their lives."

Mohr plays Benji, who discovers in the course of the show that the father who abandoned him as a baby is a famous drag queen.

"I'm kind of accepting the fact that my dad is like this and that he's

gay," he said. "It's really cool."

Mohr was recommended by longtime teacher Amy Menas and won over Roxy's artistic director Rick Bumgardner at auditions by blowing air straight up into his bangs in a moment of frustration.

"He made eye contact and never broke eye contact with me," Bumgardner said.

Bumgardner said he's been impressed with the teenager.

"Of the 16 people in the cast, he's the most professional of all of them," he said with a laugh. "He is a triple threat - an acting, singing, dancing doll."

The Australian-based "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" - a 2006 stage musical based on the 1994 cult film "The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" - celebrates not only the end of Roxy's season, Bumgardner said, but the likely emergence from the pandemic.

"I somehow had a feeling we would be through COVID at this point and this would be a celebration of accepting where we are and who we are and would be a really good thing to do for the finale," he said.

Bumgardner said the plot of the musical - whose score is full of fun hits from the 1970s and 1980s - mirrors the movie, where two drag

queens and a transwoman are reender female friend hit the road from Sydney to the Outback of Australia in the musical's titular camper van.

Benji's father, a drag queen whose stage name is Mitzi Mitois, is played by Chayston Simmons, a senior at Wichita State.

The toughest challenge, Simmons said, was "being able to get into the skin of my character."

"No one's 100% comfortable in their skin 100% of the time," he said. "It's been interesting to find out those moments when I'm OK with myself and when I'm not."

Wichita theater veteran Shaun-Michael Morse plays the transgender woman, Bernadette.

"I think she has a lot of depth," Morse said. "I have many, many transgender friends and I hope that I will represent them well. I take it very seriously. They're very dear to me and they're some of the bravest people that I know."

'PRISCILLA, QUEEN OF THE DESERT'

When: May 5-22; performances at 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; a 12:30 p.m. drag brunch precedes the Sunday shows

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

Tickets: \$30, at www.roxysdowntown.com or 316-265-4400



KEVIN CONNELLY Courtesy

Shaun-Michael Morse, left, Denver Fankhouser, center, and Chayston Simmons star in "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" at Roxy's Downtown.



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