

Making a musical stage version of a beloved movie is nothing new.

But the combination of premiering it in Wichita, having the movie's female leads being played by men and adding a score that orbits near and far from its 1962 setting certainly is.

That's the case for "**Baby Jane**, the Musical," opening Sept. 28 at Roxy's Downtown. It's based on the horror-thriller "**Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?**," a showcase for stars Bette Davis and Joan Crawford.

"This has been in my head for several years," said Roxy's CEO John Hammer, who adapted the movie version into a stage script.

Hammer knew that the title character should be played by Wichita actor John Bates. "I wanted him because of the camp," Hammer said, "but (casting) **Baby Jane** was another matter."

He wasn't set until he saw Monte Wheeler perform a few seconds of **Baby Jane** at a Mosley Street Melodrama performance last year. "When I saw that, I knew, there's **Jane**," Hammer said. "I started writing the script immediately."

Hammer pitched the concept to Kansas City director Rick Bumgardner, who enjoys the collaboration of a new theatrical endeavor.

"I have the author of the piece with me," Bumgardner said of Hammer. "It's like one of those early directors in the 1940s and '50s who was able to have Tennessee Williams or (Arthur) Miller sitting right beside him. ... That has helped me craft the show and the concept of the show, listening to him."

Bumgardner said he knew the project would work when he met his lead actors.

"If casting is 90 percent of a director's success, I was 98 percent done," he said. "It's wonderful to have such a team. The collaboration and the creative efforts of everyone here are just amazing."

Hammer said he's been trying to toe the line between homage and parody in creating "**Baby Jane**."

"It was important to make it our own," he said. "We kept the quintessential moments of the movie intact, but we brought along a lot of our own moments as well."

Bates and Wheeler are both fans of the movie, with Wheeler saying it lands "easily in my top 15 favorites."

They also say audiences don't have to be familiar with the film to be entertained.

"If you are, there are certainly many moments in the film that will be honored," Wheeler said. "There are also things that rabid fans of the film will eat up like a piece of candy."

Even though its two leads are men playing women, that's not the crux of the show, both say.

"We're certainly not trying to wink at the audience, except when we are," Wheeler said. "It's not a drag show, it's a musical."

"Rather than seeing John Bates and Monte Wheeler playing Joan Crawford and Bette Davis playing Blanche and **Jane**, they'll just see Blanche and **Jane**," Bumgardner said. "They'll lose sight of those enigmatic stars after a while. They'll get caught up in what's happening."

Steve Rue, in charge of composing, arranging and transposing the music, said the selections from various decades is reminiscent of the movie "Moulin Rouge."

"That spirit is already woven into the show," he said. "We change them and we adapt them to fit."

Bumgardner said the array of music is "part of the fun."

"When they burst into song, it will hopefully cause the audience to laugh out loud or cause the audience to smile or cause the audience to (gasp)," he said.

Ray Wills, who completes the cast with Karla Burns, said "**Baby Jane**" is hitting the stage at the right time. The recent FX drama "Feud: Bette and Joan" was up for Emmy Awards last weekend for actresses Susan Sarandon and Jessica Lange playing Davis and Crawford, respectively, in the making of the movie "**Baby Jane**."

"It's certainly timely in that way too," Wills said.

'**Baby Jane**, the Musical' When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays, from Sept. 28 to Oct. 31 (except the weekend of Oct. 19-22, during Tallgrass Film Festival activities) What: Premiere of a stage musical version of 1962 classic movie Where: Roxy's Downtown, 622 1/2 E. Douglas, Wichita Tickets: \$20-\$30, from the Roxy's box office, 316-265-4400 or roxysdowntown.com

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