

FRIDAY OCTOBER 2 2020

Roxy's opens 'Young Frankenstein' parody

BY DAVID BURKE
Eagle correspondent

Michael Downs has to think way back to the last time he was on stage.

"It was 1993," he says with a bit of hesitation on the year. "I was in the Cowtown Wild West show. Not unlike this, they needed a big guy whose feet dragged the ground around the horse. I said, 'Ugh' and the only lines I have in this are growling."

"This" is the Roxy's Downtown parody of the Mel Brooks comedy-horror sendup, "Young Frankenstein," where Downs plays the monster. It opens Thursday and continues through Nov. 1.

That Cowtown show was directed by Tom Frye, Downs' theater instructor at Southeast High School who stoked his interest in theater – and is co-directing "Young Frankenstein" with Roxy's artistic director Rick Bumgardner.

Downs, who marks his 40th anniversary in professional show business in October, acted for the first 16 years of his career and then turned his attention to production design. His resume is nearing 1,000 productions, including work at the Winter Olympics in Vancouver and Sochi, several MTV series, and his Emmy-nominated work for the "Democracy Plaza" outside 30 Rock in New York, the backdrop for the vote totals for NBC News' coverage of the presidential races.

"It won't be done this year," Downs said. "They don't want people hanging around there."

After living in 27 differ-



KEVIN CONNELLY Courtesy

"Young Frankenstein: A Scary Parody" plays at Roxy's through Nov. 1.

ent places in his life, Downs and his wife Rachel – a freelance artist whose work includes at Music Theatre Wichita and Crown Uptown Theatre – and their three children have lived in Wichita for about 12 years.

"It's always good to get work at home," Downs said.

Besides playing the monster, Downs has designed the set for the Roxy's show.

"We're very fortunate at Roxy's to have a pandemic happen that his schedule makes him available right now for us," Bumgardner said with a laugh. "It's larger than life. When you see all the technical stuff Mr. Downs has created, it's taken two of us (Frye and himself) to keep up with him, truthfully."

Bumgardner and Frye brainstormed this summer for a show that would not involve a large cast – there are eight onstage here – that would keep with the spirit of the parodies Roxy's did of "Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?" in 2018 and "Hocus Pocus"

'Young Frankenstein: A Scary Parody'

When: Oct. 1 to Nov. 1; 7 p.m. Thursdays, 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

Where: Roxy's Downtown, 412 ½ E. Douglas

Tickets: \$30 and \$25; \$10 for students; discounts for season ticket holders and military veterans, at 316-265-4400. Seating is limited.

last year.

"Is there another movie we could make a parody of in that October time frame?" Bumgardner asked Frye. "Literally within five minutes he said, 'Young Frankenstein.'"

"It's one of my very favorite movies," Frye said of the 1974 classic. "It's still popular with a lot

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of people younger than I am who still watch it, and obviously you want to select something that people will want to come and see.”

Although a musical version of the show hit Broadway in 2007, receiving three Tony Award nominations and an Outer Critics Circle Award for best musical, this is not that adaptation, Bumgardner stresses. The only music is the iconic “Puttin’ on the Ritz” number in a pivotal scene.

“They obviously changed some stuff in it

and added some,” Frye said, comparing the stage musical to the Roxy’s version. “It’s probably 80% of the musical, without the music.”

It is labeled as a parody, Bumgardner said, keeping with the Berne Convention rules for copyrighted material.

“We keep it so it resembles Roxy’s Downtown instead of the Gene Wilder-Mel Brooks film,” he said. “There’s a lot of things we’ve taken license with, brought some references to local kind of stuff. We’ve skipped scenes, we’ve moved people around.”

For the Wilder role of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, Bumgardner tapped Aus-

tin Ragusin, currently living in the Kansas City area, who had turned down another role in an area production because of COVID concerns.

After assuring him the theater was taking every precaution, Bumgardner told Ragusin what the role was, and discovered it was one of the young actor’s favorite films.

“He was like ‘Oh my God, I love that movie,’” Bumgardner recalled. “He’s very Gene Wilder-esque.”

The rest of the cast includes Gabbe Meloccaro, Patty Reeder, Christi Moor, Seth Knowles and David Raehpour.

Four weeks into rehearsal and considering

themselves in their own bubble, the cast removed their masks for practice beginning Monday. With social distancing and crowd restrictions, Bumgardner said about 64 people can be seated for any of the 17 performances, with a greater capacity if larger groups attend.

Two new air conditioners were installed at Roxy’s in June, and every surface is sanitized with hydrogen peroxide, Bumgardner said.

“We circulate the area pretty much with hospital-grade filtration systems eight times an hour,” he said. “Nothing is living COVID-wise here.”