

COVENTRY



Photo by Kendra Lolio

The ensemble cast of 'Avenue Q: School Edition' rehearses at Coventry High earlier this week.

It's the 'Q' on everyone's minds

Ensemble cast of Coventry High theater students get ready to perform 'Avenue Q,' a colorful, crazy, comedic musical – that also has puppets

KENDRA LOLIO
klolio@ricentral.com

COVENTRY – Every year the Coventry High School Drama Department puts on two big shows, and this year the lineup will include: "Avenue Q: School Edition." For those unfamiliar with the hit Broadway production of the show, titled "Avenue Q," it is typically R-rated and fairly mature in its subject matter. However, in this school version, the jokes are fit for ages 10 and up and will have all members of the family laughing and smiling.

The play tells the story of a recent college graduate named Princeton who moves into a shabby New York apartment on Avenue Q. He eventually discovers that as nice as his fellow residents are, the neighborhood is far from normal. Together with the others in the neighborhood, the characters of the show struggle to find jobs, dates, and a purpose in life.

Those who have seen productions at the school before know that many in the past have dealt with sobering and dark subjects. Coventry Theatre Program Director Mychael Wilkinson said he chose to go in a different direction this year, and the students seem to adore the choice.

"I hadn't done a musical in a long time," Wilkinson said. "The last musical I had done was Rent about 5 years ago.

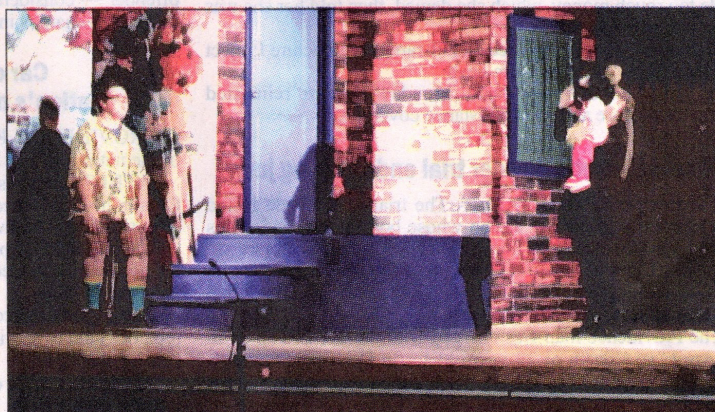


Photo by Kendra Lolio

The ensemble cast of 'Avenue Q: School Edition' rehearses at Coventry High earlier this week.

We didn't have the right talent pool in the past and I didn't feel we had people who were interested in doing a musical and that changes each year."

Wilkinson said this year the cast was perfect for a musical, and he changed his mind several times before deciding on "Avenue Q."

"I do more serious work typically. I can't think of the last time I did something humorous, but I saw this on Broadway and I loved it."

The Broadway show features a handful of actors and puppets, but for the Coventry High School production, Wilkinson said he wanted an ensemble. As such, there are 23 cast members participating in the musical and 8 backstage crew members. Parents also assist in painting and building sets as well as orchestrating hair and makeup for the actors.

See AVENUE, page A3

Avenue

Continued from page A1

Both Wilkinson and the cast agreed that by far the most complicated aspect of putting together the production was learning how to use the puppets. According to Wilkinson, the puppets used in the Broadway show can run upwards of \$3,000, and the drama department at CHS is self-funded.

"I decided that over the summer I would try to buy my own," said Wilkinson. "I started shopping and worked all summer. I added animal puppets to up the humor factor. It will be funny and color-filled."

Wilkinson said that he had to personally research and learn about puppetry in order to educate his cast members.

"We had to have puppet school," he said. "I spent the summer reading and studying so I could teach the kids puppetry. They're acting but the audience is focused on the puppets during the show."

He said that the set, a brick wall with two bright blue apartment doors, is intended to resemble a spin on a typical children's program, such as Sesame Street. The cast and crew, comprised of students both familiar with and new to theater, have been working tirelessly since auditions began in September to get the production ready for showtime, even on weekends. Students noted that while putting together musical was more work than a typical show, they appreciated learning the art of puppetry and all agreed that they had created meaningful bonds with one another in the process.

"I'm a freshman here and this is the first time I've worked with the drama department,"

said Marcus Evans. "It's been an awesome experience getting to meet so many wonderful people. The hours have been long, but they go quickly because we're always having a wonderful time. I have to give full credit to Mr. Wilkinson for making it fun."

"I've done a few shows with Mr. Wilkinson and I have to say that I've found the most challenging part of this is the puppets," said Melanie Ryan. "I've never worked with puppets before like most of the cast. There's a lot of dark messages to this show, but the puppets bring life to it. We have to learn to move their heads and make them the character. It was a really fun challenge."

Wilkinson added that the show is provocative in the way it asks the audience to consider the jokes.

"It pokes fun, highlights, and lets us think," he explained. "The older you are, the more you'll laugh with this. It's just funny."

CHS Senior and Stage Manager Katy McCarthy, who is working on her sixth production this year, said that she could tell the actors were getting more comfortable with their puppets the more they practiced.

"They've come extremely far," she said. "They started out never having picked up a puppet and now I can't take my eyes off the puppets. They definitely bring life to them."

"Avenue Q: School Edition" will run on Dec. 8, 9 and 10 at 7:30 p.m. in the Coventry High School auditorium. The original production has won the Tony "Triple Crown" award for Best Musical, Best Score, and Best Book. Tickets will be on sale at the door each night beginning at 6:30 p.m. Tickets are \$15 for students and \$20 for the general public.