

'Fame': Musical mirrors story of theater, town

Capital Playhouse show: 'It sends a message that hard work does pay off'

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"Fame" - a musical about a bunch of ambitious teens at a performing arts high school - is quite the appropriate choice for Capital Playhouse.

The musical opens Thursday, just a few weeks after the announcement that founder Jeff Kingsbury is no longer affiliated with the theater.

Behind the scenes, it's been a year of transitions for the staff of the playhouse, which has cut expenses and hired a new managing director.

The musical, a follow-up to the 1980 film and the TV series about the High School for the Performing Arts in New York City, stresses the power of persistence and celebrates triumphs over obstacles.

"'Fame' is a great show for this theater and for this town," said Andrew Turteltaub of New York City, who is visiting Olympia to direct the show. "It sends the message that hard work does pay off."

"That's the storyline of the show but it's also the storyline for the theater company itself."

The show's focus on a group of talented high school students is also an appropriate one for the playhouse, well known for its summer youth theater program, Kids at Play. Among the cast are a dozen graduates of or participants in Kids at Play, which is celebrating its 25th year. (The program, also created by Kingsbury, actually predates the playhouse's regular season.)

"We train a lot of young actors, and some of them are going to show their stuff on stage," said Troy Arnold Fisher, the playhouse's musical director and interim artistic director.

Turteltaub said, "The best thing about this cast is that a lot of them are homegrown here in Olympia. A lot of them are from the Kids at Play program, and it has been a great experience to work with these kids. Their level of professionalism is outstanding."

The musical, set during the last years of the school before it became a part of La Guardia High School, will evoke nostalgia among those who came of age in the '80s – and among those who were fans of the film and show.

The plot of this musical is similar, Turteltaub said, but “the characters are different. They are loosely based on the characters from the movie and the TV show.”

The musical does depict some drug use, he said, but it eliminates the film’s plot line about a student who is lured into posing nude for a sleazy photographer.

And almost all of the songs are new. “It is full on 100 percent a fun pop-rock musical,” Turteltaub said. “It has great songs. We do have the title song ‘Fame’ in the musical, but everything else is original just for the musical.”

Playhouse audiences will see more shifts next year, when the theater adds a few nonmusical plays to its season for the first time.

Meanwhile, “Fame” is itself a product of the transitions at the theater. It replaced “Kiss of the Spider Woman” in the season-ending slot. Kingsbury had been slated to star in “Kiss,” and the musical was also a riskier artistic choice, Fisher said.

“(Kiss) is kind of an unheard-of show, even though it was done by a famous composing team, Kander and Ebb, who wrote ‘Chicago’ and ‘Cabaret,’” he said. “And talk about a dark show: It’s about a transvestite who is in prison and dying.”