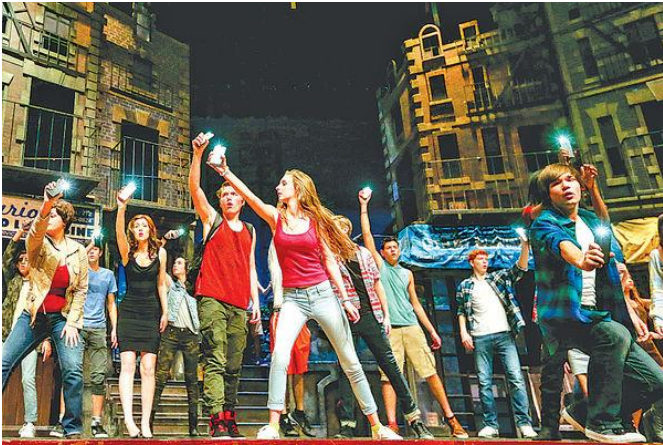


Dakota musical going to new ‘Heights’

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By Thomas Franz✉



The cast of “In the Heights” performs “Blackout” during a Jan. 19 rehearsal. (Photo by Patricia O’Blenes)

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Dakota senior Jared Newton sings “96,000” as the character Benny during a Jan. 19 rehearsal of “In the Heights.” (Photo by Patricia O’Blenes)

MACOMB TOWNSHIP — Hip hop on Broadway is one way Dakota High School students are describing their upcoming winter performances of “In the Heights.”

Cast members said they weren’t initially familiar with the show when they were introduced to it, but after learning about the modern touches of the show, they are more eager than ever to put their own spin on the production.

“Most of the cast had no idea what this show was, but the spirit and energy that we’ve all put into this is incredible,” said Ashley DeBeaussaert, a senior who is playing the role of Vanessa.

“In the Heights,” a winner of several Tony Awards in 2008, examines a vibrant community in New York City’s Washington Heights district. The show portrays the struggles of neighborhood residents who are faced with a decision to leave in hopes of a better future or to stay and improve their hometown, said Dakota drama director Kelly Schmidt.

“I have been in love with this show since it came out on Broadway almost a decade ago,” Schmidt said. “Directors decided to expose our community to contemporary musical theatre, and now is the time.”

One contemporary aspect to the show will be the hip hop and rap performances by lead actor, senior Sam Khalil, who plays the role of Usnavi De La Vega.

Khalil says he has written about an album's worth of rap poetry, and he is looking forward to adapting his rap and hip hop talent for a musical performance.

"That's why 'In the Heights' to me was such an awesome show when I learned about it, because it seemed very much in my comfort zone," Khalil said. "It's very much like the music we listen to everyday, so to do a musical like that is much more in everyone's comfort zone as opposed to classical music."

Schmidt said that Khalil's musical ability has added great depth to the character he is playing.

"Sam's rapping is phenomenal. It is clear, precise and poetic. It is never a challenge to understand him and, as the narrator of the show, he does a great job of sharing the story," Schmidt said. "This makes his character, Usnavi, even deeper than the character written in the script."

Although Khalil and DeBeaussaert have performed in shows each of the last two years, "In the Heights" represents their first chance to be a lead character, and they seem to be embracing that opportunity.

"I feel more connected to each show that I have a bigger part in. Last year, I worked pretty hard, but this year I'm doing everything I possibly can to make this show — not only my performance, but the experience everyone has — the best it possibly can be, just because I care about it so much," DeBeaussaert said.

"It's tough sometimes," Khalil said. "Not only are you learning so much material, but you are now kind of the face of the program and you have to be the most responsible person when you come to rehearsals and when you promote the show."

While Khalil and DeBeaussaert have performed in previous shows, sophomore Nikki Williams will play another lead role, Nina Roasrio, in her first musical ever with Dakota.

Williams said she has been performing on stage since she was 8 years old, and aspired to grab a lead role in her first audition at Dakota.

"I wasn't expecting it because it's my first show, but I wanted a lead because who wouldn't," Williams said. "My performance experience prepared me a lot because just doing that since I was little has gotten me comfortable with the stage. I feel like the stage is my second home."

Schmidt said the show will display the actual touring and Broadway set used by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who also created the "Hamilton" shows which have grown in immense popularity nationwide.

The school is renting the set from a company that purchased the set after "In the Heights" concluded touring.

"We are thrilled to say that we have the actual Broadway and touring set for our students this year," Schmidt said. "It was a long two days to put together this massive set but it is a beautiful piece of work which we are blessed to share with our students."

Dakota will host shows Feb. 9-11 and Feb. 16-18. Tickets cost \$10 and may be pre-purchased at www.dakotamusical.seatyourself.biz.

Tickets may also be purchased at the door if the show is not sold out. In-person ticket sales start at 6 p.m. before each show, and doors open for each show at 6:30 p.m.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Staff Writer Thomas Franz covers Macomb Township, Chippewa Valley Schools and the Macomb County Board of Commissioners for the Macomb Township Chronicle. He also covers sports primarily for the Shelby-Utica News. He has worked for C & G Newspapers since 2013 and attended Michigan State University.
