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The Rose Theater educates as well as entertains with *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever: The Musical*

(OMAHA, Nebr.) When the 15 student actors in the cast of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* take the stage at The Rose on December 1, director Anthony Clark-Kaczmarek hopes that they put on a great show, but more importantly, that they have had a memorable educational experience.

“It is important to me that everyone involved with this show has an experience where they learn something,” says Clark-Kaczmarek. “Working with students, that is what I do, that is what I feel strongly about. It’s my passion.”

As the principal at Alice Buffett Middle School and a former drama teacher, Clark-Kaczmarek brings his educational expertise to The Rose as the guest director for the theater’s upcoming holiday production, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. Even though he is sitting in the director’s seat, Clark-Kaczmarek has embraced The Rose’s philosophy of using theater as a means to educate as well as entertain. This philosophy extends from the message being shared with the audience through to the student actors who are a part of the cast.

“These students are the crux of this show,” he explains. “These student actors carry the brunt of the work in this musical. In *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, you are going to see, at a children’s theater, the children do the work. This is not a case where the adults do the work and the kids are just part of the little ensemble. These young actors really have a lot on their plate – tons of big musical numbers, tons of lines. They do a lot and they are going to knock your socks off.”

With such a large responsibility being placed on the shoulders of children and teens, Clark-Kaczmarek knew he would need to draw on The Rose’s proficiency in training young performers. As a result, rehearsals for *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* have become almost like a daily master class for the young actors in the play.

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The idea of using rehearsal time to educate students on the craft of theater is not always common to the performance world, where usually the focus is on getting a show on stage as efficiently as possible. As musical director Jerry Brabec explains, “One of the most astounding things about *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* is that we get the opportunity to be educators. A lot of time when you are involved with community theater, you don’t get to put on your education hat. One of the wonderful things at The Rose is that you are encouraged as a staff to be not only great artists, but also the best educators we can be,” he says.

Rose artist educator Ashley Laverty takes on the character of Betty in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, but knows that her biggest role happens behind the scenes; she works directly with the students to help them hone their skills.

“Every time that the young actors are working on a scene, I am in the room,” Laverty explains. “I watch Anthony stage the show, and then my work begins. I am there to help with side coaching and to answer the students’ questions throughout the rehearsal process.”

Laverty describes the nightly rehearsal process as a daily version of one of The Rose’s many acting classes. In addition to their work on stage, the student actors spend time in the classroom delving into character development by answering a “question of the day” in the voice of the characters, engaging in theater games to build their ensemble skills and exploring dramatic choices to better enhance their performance.

Student actor Chase Robinson, a fifth grader at Buffett Middle School, describes a typical rehearsal. “We rehearse the scenes that we learned that week with Ashley. She gives us comments and suggestions and we can try different things. Ashley is really helping me become a professional,” she says.

Laverty’s skills go beyond just helping students learn their lines and blocking. “Ashley is an amazing teacher. She is so compassionate and wise. Her comments help give me ideas on how to portray my character. With Ashley’s help, I can get more personalized attention than I have in other shows. This helps me improve as I get deeper into how my character would think,” says Annabella Mosher, a ninth grader from Concordia High School who plays Alice.

“I have really empowered Ashley to become this creative mind in the room that gets to shape and mold these young actors,” says Clark-Kaczmarek.

In this way, The Rose hopes to not only put on a great show, but also to inspire a new generation of artists who will bring their skills to their school theater programs, as well as other theaters around the city, and beyond.

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“The Rose’s way is really different from the other shows I have done,” says Lilly Weak, a junior at Central High School playing the part of Beth Bradley. “The Rose expects us all to be professionals, but they help us reach that expectation. These kinds of experiences allow for us kids to grow.”

Chloe Irwin, a veteran student actor at The Rose and at other theaters in Omaha, agrees. “I think The Rose is great at teaching kids. Every time I do a show at The Rose, I feel that it helps me improve a lot. It is a great experience,” she says.

“The Rose is different from other theaters. The Rose definitely teaches you what rehearsing for a Broadway show feels like,” says Kaeli Vondra, a seventh grader at Bennington Middle School playing Imogene Herdman.

“Throughout the production, you can see that our focus is really about education. We want everyone to have an educational experience – and also to feel like this is just an awesome show. This is a fun play, a funny musical, but it is really about enlightenment and discovery,” says Clark-Kaczmarek. “It is really important to me that everyone involved has an experience where they learn something – from the student and adult actors, to the directors and designers, and also the audience.”

“It’s going to be a busy Christmas season for these young performers, but it is going to be great,” he adds.

The students in the cast of *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* include: Kaeli Vondra, Chase Robinson, Wayne Hudson, Luke Nieland, Josiah Hydeen, Jonas Caruso, Lily Weak, Carson Bishop, Chloe Irwin, Mason Lindsey, Kian Roblin, Annabella Mosher, Hayden Blayney, Briana Nash and Phoenix Nehls.

The student actors are joined by the adult cast, which includes Sarah Gibson, Dan Chevalier, Theresa Sindelar, Kabin Thomas, Jennifer Gilg, Marguerite Bennett, Robby Stone, and Ashley Laverty.

“I think the actors that we have corralled into this cast are some of the best that we can ask for, no question. These are really talented musicians, talented dancers, amazing actors,” says Clark-Kaczmarek.

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The Best Christmas Pageant Ever runs December 1-23, 2017, with performances Fridays at 7 pm, Saturdays at 2 pm, select Saturdays at 7 pm, and Sundays at 2 pm. The 2 pm show on Saturday, December 16 will be interpreted for people who are deaf or hard of hearing; this show will also include audio description services for audience members who are blind. Contact The Rose Box Office at (402) 345-4849 for more information.

Tickets for The Best Christmas Pageant Ever are \$27 for main floor and \$22 for balcony. Discount ticket vouchers are available at all area Hy-Vee stores for \$22. Members of The Rose receive discounted tickets to the production.

The Best Christmas Pageant Ever is sponsored by Children's Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, Hy-Vee, Omaha Steaks, the Nebraska Arts Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment. Special opening night activities, including live reindeer, a sleigh for photo opportunities, crafts with Mrs. Claus and a visit from Santa, are sponsored by Kiewit Companies.

About The Rose

The Rose Theater is one of the largest and most accomplished children's theaters in the nation, with a reputation for enriching the lives of children and families through top-quality professional productions and arts education. In 2016, *American Theatre* magazine named The Rose one of the 20 top children's theaters in the United States. The Rose is committed to making the arts accessible to all children, providing opportunities for thousands of children throughout the community to attend shows and participate in classes each year. Over the course of a year, approximately 70,000 people attend the public performances held at the theater, and nearly 30,000 students attend field trip shows annually. The theater strives to introduce young people to a mix of both traditional favorites and ground-breaking original productions. A number of plays and musicals have made their world premiere on The Rose stage, including the stage adaptation of *Prancer*, *Pete the Cat: The Musical*, *Sherlock Holmes & the First Baker Street Irregular*, *Zen Ties*, *Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*, and *The Grocer's Goblin & The Little Mermaid*. We take pride knowing that The Rose is the place where children of all ages experience theater for the first time, and we are dedicated to helping them appreciate theater for a lifetime.

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