

Blecha: Set, costumes, props, cast promise a memorable ‘Oz’

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Vivid and ornate costumes. Breathtaking sets and incredible props.

A live dog plus a cast that is 144 members strong.

Gothenburg High School music teacher Ernie Blecha is going all out this year with the musical “The Wizard of Oz.”

The production takes the performing arts center stage this Saturday, Sunday and Monday.

“The kids have worked so hard on this production,” he said, noting that he’s never directed such a large cast. “I do feel our cast has really taken the persona of their characters and seem to emulate them beyond my expectations.”

Blecha started teaching high schoolers in 2004 but didn’t direct “The Wizard of Oz” which was the first musical performed on the performing arts stage in the spring of 2004 after the new school was built.

One of the reasons he wanted to do the musical this year was because of an impressive production of “The Wizard of Oz” he saw in Omaha last summer.

“I’ve never seen live poppies in a performance before and the girls wearing them were simply beautiful as they sang and danced,” he said. “The Oz costumes were amazing as well.”

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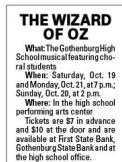
After the musical, Blecha said he was blown away when he discovered the theatre group was getting rid of the set.

As a result, Blecha drove a truck to Omaha and loaded up the set. He also rented props like Miss Gulch's bicycle, an hourglass from the witch's castle, a gypsy wagon, munchkin flowers, Emerald City, the door to Oz and an exploding witch's broom.

The costumes, set and props from Omaha bring a little of the city to the community, he said, and the musical combines those elements with a cast to make it a remarkable show.

Backdrops are a part of Blecha's later productions which weren't used in the first musicals.

The music teacher, who began directing musicals in 2004, said he's excited about a 20x50-foot munchkinland backdrop that "will put that part of the musical over the top."



"When you have visuals, set pieces from Omaha, add about 75 munchkins all in costume plus Glinda, Dorothy and the wicked witch and special effects, I think it will be memorable," Blecha said. "As long as they bring the energy that I've seen them have to the stage, the munchkins should be a highlight of the show."

One of the biggest challenges in preparing for the musical is the same one as every year—adjusting to student schedules and illness that has kept some cast members out of practice.

Another obstacle has been getting used to the set.

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When theatre troupes in cities like Omaha put on a show, Blecha explained they have room built into their stage area which the GHS stage doesn't have.

“So we have to adapt the set to rolling platforms instead,” he said.

By the time all of the set pieces are backstage, there's little room to move around.

Working with a live animal has also been interesting.

Blecha said the Omaha production included both a real and stuffed dog and “the scenes with the stuffed animal just didn't seem right.”

Dorothy (played by Abbie Mazour) found “Snuggles” who belongs to Betty Volkman who lives at Stone Hearth Estates.

And because of the magnitude and energy of the cast, he said Toto sometimes becomes nervous.

“She was most frightened when we had a rehearsal with the witch's monkeys, a very energetic group, so we decided to write her out of those scenes and will let her stay behind stage instead,” Blecha said. “And if you think you were scared as a kid when you saw the monkeys on TV, you might feel the same way with them on stage this year.”

Since Blecha first began directing musicals, choir numbers have grown with more and more students interested in performing in musicals even those without speaking parts.

In addition to Blecha, the assistant director is LuAnn Houchin who works on blocking, choreography, etc. Stephanie Block is in charge of costumes and Erin Feather is involved with

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lights and sound.

Blecha urged the community to buy tickets early.

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