CATS

FANCY

Next Spring, The YHS Theatre Department Will Present The Classic Musical 'CATS' — An Ambitious Undertaking That Has The Crew Already Preparing For The Production

EDITORS NOTE: This is the first in a series of stories involving the preparations for Yankton High School's spring musical production.

BY ALISSA WOOCKMAN

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Imagine a version of "American Idol" for cats — let's call it "Feline Idol." Each one gets a turn to perform, and there is only one judge. Every cat is going to sing not only a song of its choosing, but a song about its life. At the end, the prize isn't a recording contract, but the chance to be reborn into a new life.

This is the way director Amy Miner describes Yankton High School's upcoming spring musical to interested students.

"CATS" is the fourth longest-running show in Broadway history. It is known for its enormous spectacle of high energy dances and comical personalities. Based on a collection of poems by T. S. Eliot, cats gather in a junkyard for one special night each year to tell their secrets through song.

"I'm an Aquarius. We are always walking a fine line between genius and insanity," Miner said. "This one is one that makes me feel both at the same time. It is a massive production. It will be the biggest thing I have ever done."

Miner first got the idea for the production while on vacation this summer. While singing various songs from Broadway musicals, she began to sing a song from "CATS" and spent the rest of vacation researching the rates and rights to produce it.

Although the curtain date is set for April, Miner's creative team is already working to translate this classic to the YHS stage.

"Because we live in the Midwest, a lot of our kids don't have the chance to go see Broadway shows," said assistant director Pam Kallis. "So when we bring Broadway to them, they have no choice but to make it their own. That is the fun for us – to take what we know that has been done and watch what they can create on their own."

Kallis is also in charge of building the intricate costumes that will bring to life the uniquely curious nature of these bright-eyed creatures. She is currently working with production assistant Jennifer Kirchner to prepare all the yarn involved in creating head pieces and furry attire.

"I have already had several students come and tell me they don't know if they want to be in a full-body suit," Kallis said. "As a cat owner, I know that I have two cats in my house that would not look very good in body suits. They are kind of big, fluffy and lumpy. I'm thinking the kids can look like my own cats."

Meanwhile, choreographer Kathryn Reimler is working on adapting the story and the music to incorporate each cat-in-training.

"A lot of people don't know what this show is about," she said. "They don't realize that it is just literally about cats' lives and these characters. Every song, even though they are all about cats, has a different feel and almost a different time period so that each one is unique."

The production calls for approximately 45 instruments, which is an impossible goal to reach, Miner said.

Instead, the team purchased Rodgers & Hammerstein's instrumental lease, a computerized program that allows the control of an entire orchestra into the fingertips of one person via an electronic keyboard. With this software, the conductor can maintain tempo, raise and lower sections of instrumentals and even change song keys to accommodate different singers.

"The thing that I am

ALISSA WOOCKMAN/P&D

ABOVE: Sophomore Mary Schmidt and Assistant Director Pam Kallis begin preparations for Yankton High School's spring musical "CATS." Kallis is unraveling yarn and tying it together to make fur that will eventually be glued on to the headpieces. The entire process takes approximately 10 hours for each feline head piece. **BELOW:** Willa Reimler, daughter of choreographer Kathryn Reimler, sports one of the sample head pieces created by production assistant Jennifer Kirchner for Yankton High School's upcoming spring musical "CATS."

always proudest of is that the students run the productions," Miner said. "The students run the tech, the students run the music and the students are on stage. It's theirs."

Miner is spending this initial preparation period researching with musical director Julie Amsberry to get a feel for the various characters through the play. She admits that an important aspect of this production will be finding those key elements that make each cat unique.

"In musical theatre, it is all about storytelling," Miner said. "Some (actors) are going to be able to story-tell through dance, some are going to be able to story-tell through whatever song

they are singing and some will story-tell by interacting with each other on stage. We have to find and work toward their strengths."

Each year, the musical is given an amount of money from the school board to guarantee production. In addition, the team would like to raise at least $1,000 to supplement the costume, make-up and set budget.

"A musical is incredibly expensive," Miner said. "Between the symphonia, the royalties and rights, we have spent over half of our budget just on paper. One of the challenges that every school play has is having to do it with no money."

This is the reason Miner values her creative team to utilize its past experiences

and contacts to help produce the best materials from minimal resources.

The team recently held a fundraiser involving the sell-from-home company Jamberry featuring nail polish, gel and wraps. Reimler and Amsberry, fans of the product, hosted the party through a Facebook page where people could buy products through the musical's party and receive a percentage of the profits.

"That is the joy of doing this for so many years," Kallis said. "You just build relationships with people who understand what you're doing and what your end goal is."

The group is looking to coordinate more fundraisers once production plans progress. For now, the team members are hoping to land on their feet in terms of organizing their own parts, as well as building the skill set of the cast.

Auditions will be held the third week of February and Miner is anxious to see what YHS students can bring to the table in terms of commitment.

"This play lets us pull out all the stops," Miner said. "No one around here has done it before — because it is daunting and most people haven't seen it — so we get to make it our own."

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