

Theatre, opera veteran directs 'Beauty & Beast'

By Carol Viescas for "STAGE TALK" in El Paso Scene Online, February 2017

A last-minute decision changed theater director Justin Lucero's life. He needed a break from teaching duties. So, as he puts it, he "accidentally found myself auditioning for my first-ever show, Disney's "Beauty and the Beast," at the UTEP Dinner Theatre ... and I caught the bug! Big!"

Definitely a change from the young El Pasoan who loved the saxophone so much it earned him a scholarship to Texas Christian University, where his practical self studied E-business and International Marketing.

"When I graduated, I found my passion just wasn't in business, and luckily my German minor and two summer business courses in Germany gave me the confidence to apply for a German teacher position at a pioneering magnet school for foreign languages (Alicia Chacon). I loved teaching! I still do. I became department head, 'Teacher of the Year,' campus lead mentor and presented at many state and national conferences."

But then he decided to unwind a little and audition for UTEP Dinner Theatre.

He started infusing his German lessons with drama, started an after-school theater club, and eventually, successfully added a missing theater component to the middle school curriculum. Then he took the plunge, quit his job and moved to London, where he was accepted into a major drama school and earned his MFA in Theatre Directing.

"By the time my visa expired, I already had two assistant credits on the West End. When I returned, I found myself impressed with El Paso Opera's latest production (a high concept 'West Side Story'), wrote to the artistic director, and was hired for the next half-dozen shows." He now has been a Guest Artist in Residence at UTEP for several years, where, among other things, he directed and wrote and was on the creative team for the centennial Smithsonian co-production of Opera Bhutan.

Lucero currently is director of Community Engagement and the Young Artists Program for El Paso Opera, mainly as resident assistant stage director for the past six seasons. And he and Megan McQueen founded Scaffolding Theatre Company in 2014. He met McQueen, who is in the Theatre Arts faculty at NMSU, when they both performed "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" at the dinner theatre.

Which brings us to his current work for Scaffolding, Disney's "Beauty and the Beast," which plays at the Philanthropy Theatre Feb. 11-12. The timing, Lucero said, was right for doing this show.

“First, last year marked the 25th anniversary of the ground-breaking animated film, and this year is the release of the new live-action film version that is so very buzzed about. Our company was looking for its first family-friendly musical, perfect for our first foray into touring a show (three stops: Las Cruces, Socorro, N.M. and El Paso). And our current willingness of risk-taking in terms of artistry and experimentalism meant that we wanted a fantasy spectacle that would stretch us, but that would also capture audience imagination, which is my directorial philosophy.”

The two decided the Philanthropy was right for their “radical re-approach to the usually-HUGE show. No one would ever think of pitching a big Broadway musical on such a tiny stage. We found the application and pitched our company’s history, mission, philosophy and the show concept to the powers-that-be at the Jewel Box Series and they were very impressed. Somewhat skeptical, but impressed. They said that our attention to detail, high level of experience and obvious passion helped them know that if any company could pull off such a feat, it was us. We were in!”

There is a cast of only 10 actors playing multiple roles. Sets, props and costumes are all what one would find in that particular room in the house.

“We infuse object theatre, puppetry, shadows, physical theatre, choreography and all sorts of theatre magic in our new, yet familiar, version of the classic show.”

But the results, he said, have been satisfying: “It has been both the most fun and the biggest challenge of anything we’ve done. There is so much pressure related to the expectations of such a classic musical. But in the end, the group of performers, musicians, technicians and volunteers that were involved helped create a perfect storm of creativity and artistry. We only put this on in 17 rehearsals, and needed to make sure it would work on the road, in three different spaces of vastly varying sizes.”

His next challenge will be directing “Anything Goes” at the dinner theater.

“Director Gregory L. Taylor hired me to assist him on the world premiere of the Sir Tim Rice musical ‘Lute!’ Greg and I got to know each other even better when he just so happened to be on sabbatical in London while I was in grad school in London. Greg and the entire dinner theatre staff have been an incredible support of my career. And now that Greg was looking for new blood to direct for this season, he said it was clear who he’d ask first. 2017 has become a full-circle year, between Disney’s Beauty and the Beast and the dinner theatre.”

Carol Viescas is a veteran of community theater and teaches journalism at Bel Air High School.

Scaffolding Theatre presents Disney’s “Beauty and the Beast” at 7 p.m. Saturday and 2:30 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 11-12, at the Philanthropy Theatre (next to the Plaza Theatre). Tickets: \$16 (Ticketmaster).