



ABLE TO ACT

By Thomas Glennon

Theatre has long been a sanctuary for students of all backgrounds. However, perhaps by virtue of live theatre or as a product of a history of discrimination, it is rare to see actors with cognitive or physical disabilities integrated into performances.

However, this has not deterred Christina Myatt, Director of Theatre and Speech at PVHS, from trying.

At the annual PV Spartan Drama awards in May of 2022, Myatt announced an inclusive production of “The Wizard of Oz: Youth Edition,” the inaugural show of the Spartan Spotlighters, an inclusive theatre initiative that seeks to integrate actors with disabilities.

“I chose [this show] because of Dorothy’s classic song which seemed fitting for the kickoff of the program, ‘if happy little bluebirds fly, beyond the rainbow, why oh why can’t I,’” Myatt stated.

This will mark the first production on the Spartan stage to primarily feature actors with disabilities, opening an expressive avenue for a large portion of the student body.

Myatt detailed the procedure for putting on such a show, “The process is very much the same as any other show. With any show, you must create the tools that will help actors learn and portray their parts, make accommodations for clothing, allergies and specific learning needs. Each time I do a show, the movement of the show is designed to be in line with the ability level of the cast,” she stated. “I think the biggest misconception is



that one needs to do things ‘differently.’” The drama department was started nearly 50 years ago. Since

then, it has produced well over 200 shows, featuring up-and-coming actors from Samantha Pauly, Kathrine Howard in the opening production of “SIX” on Broadway, to Whitney Bashor, originator of Rachel in “MJ: The Musical.”

However, PV Spartan Drama has also been home to actors with cognitive or physical disabilities. “Here at PVHS, we have had students who have had differing abilities in our productions before. Not because we purposefully recruited them, but because their own personal interests caused them to gravitate to the department,” Myatt continued.

Broadway itself is saturated by abled actors, and has long been a site of appropriate casting of disabled roles.

“Next to Normal,” a 2009 Broadway musical, features a lead role with bipolar disorder, a major plot point to the story. However, no productions of the show have ever featured a bipolar actor in the role.

This appropriation not only excludes actors with disabilities from theatre; it excludes actors with disabilities from their own stories, isolating both viewers and actors of different backgrounds. Productions like Myatt’s “The Wizard of Oz: Youth Edition” are pivotal in creating a more diverse theatrical landscape.

“I firmly believe that theatre should be accessible to all,” Myatt expressed. “For too long, theatre has excluded those within our communities. Theatre is about learning, about building bridges, about making audiences feel something, about sharing our stories—all of our stories. Just as we would not exclude those with different needs than our own from school, shops, and other events; we must show inclusion in theatre and tell the stories that need to be heard.”

Myatt is not alone, though.

Many artists throughout the Quad Cities collaborate on The Penguin Project, a national initiative to feature disabled actors onstage. With over 50 chapters across the

country, The Penguin Project is able to reach actors with disabilities of all backgrounds, and features actors with mental, physical and developmental disabilities.



The Penguin Project of the Quad Cities is run through Augustana College and the Center for Living Arts by Jeff Coussens, Dino Hay, and Tina Garrison-Hayz. Their shows have featured actors of all backgrounds, including actors from PV.

Hayz commented on the importance of a program like The Penguin Project. “The Penguin Project of the Quad Cities takes students with special needs, calls them Artists, and produces a musical with them as the leads of the show,” he explained. “The relationships forged are strong, unique and full of heart. One of our Artists said that this experience for him has demonstrated the highest form of UNITY. He wishes the world were set up the way the Penguin Project is set up. I agree with him.”

This inclusive opportunity inspired Myatt in her upcoming production.

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“A student came to me and talked about seeing The Penguin Project at Augustana and noticing how many students came from PV,” Myatt said. “Before coming fulltime to PVHS, I worked at Augustana at the time that this program was first offered. There is something magical about seeing an art form I love being created by those who have for so long been told this was not something available to them. The smiles, the friendships, the benefit to those involved (regardless of abilities) is evident.”

“The Wizard of Oz: Youth Edition” will be shown April 28th and 29th at 7pm in the auditorium.