

Centralia College Theater Leader Says Goodbye With a Tribute to Community

By Carrina Stanton / For The Chronicle | Posted: Thursday, May 12, 2016 10:11 am



"Once On This Island"

Megan Tyrell, playing the role of Ti Moune, performs a song at the beginning of the play "Once On This Island" during a rehearsal on Monday afternoon at the Corbet Theatre at Centralia College.

It's hard to talk about "Once on This Island," which opens tonight at Centralia College's Corbet Theater, without talking about Brian Tyrrell.

It is his 95th and last show at the helm of Centralia College theater. But perhaps more importantly, the Polynesian-style musical seems a mirror to Tyrrell's 25-year career at Centralia College in that it is about storytelling, family and community.

"Any actor's life is about storytelling," Tyrrell said. "The last song in this show is called 'Why We Tell the Story' and my favorite line is 'for all the ones we leave and we believe. Our lives become the stories that we weave.' ... I've been a sentimental slob during this show. In a play that's about the heart it's pretty easy to wear your heart on your sleeve."

With music by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty, "Once on This Island" is a musical adaptation of "The Little Mermaid." In the beginning of the story, a young child is frightened by a storm and all the inhabitants of the tropical island come together to tell her the story of Ti Moune, a young peasant girl who falls in love with Daniel, a wealthy city dweller, and is willing to give up her life for his love. Lucy Page, who plays Mama Euralie, Ti Moune's adoptive mother, is one of 16 members of the 31-member cast who have worked with him before. She said the story is very personal, and audience members will likely see the connections to themselves in the show.

"I have the sense of community, and the multigenerational cast reflects the community we

live in, the care they have for each other," Page said. "In the opening act they talk about dancing no matter what. They persevere by dancing through life."

Tyrrell's daughter, Megan Tyrrell, plays Ti Moune and has choreographed the dance numbers. His wife, Jana Tyrrell, fills the role of Erzulie. When asked about being part of this cast, the two said they both felt it was important to audition for some role to be present for this transition.

"It's a gift to be part of that journey," Jana Tyrrell said. "We talk about journeys all the time and this show is about the journey. It's a blessing to be part of it both professionally and certainly personally."

Jana added that one strong theme in "Once on This Island" is the triumph of love over death. She said that aspect of the story rings true to her in their personal life.

"We'll go away from this program but our love for these kids will never end," Jana Tyrrell said.

For Megan Tyrrell, a professional actress now living in Seattle, being part of her father's show is not just a tribute to him but also to Centralia College theater, which she said created her love for the stage. She noted with a laugh that she didn't go to daycare as a child, she went to rehearsals, and recalled being a young girl running through the old Corbet Hall with their family dog while Dad directed plays.

"There could not be a more perfect way for me to come back and honor everything I've learned here," said Megan Tyrrell. "It's knowing your roots and where you came from and being able to physically and symbolically respect that."

For the veterans of Tyrrell's stage, the show is bittersweet. Many, like Tyrrell's daughter and wife, made special efforts to be part of his last cast. And many teared up talking about the show, even while expressing extreme joy in being part of it.

Jamie Baker, who plays the children's nanny and a storyteller, is retiring from Centralia College's TEEN program this year and now lives in Oregon. She said this production will also be her last at Centralia College but she never would have missed it. She said the story's themes of family and togetherness are very similar to the family-like atmosphere Centralia College productions are known for.

"It's fun and they will see the people on stage having fun," Baker said. "When audience members see the happiness in this story, it's going to make them happy."

But Tyrrell said this play is not only a mirror to his life and career but it is about the next generation of storytellers. Tyrrell said he felt honored to have so many familiar faces in this cast but also to have so many new faces and to get one more chance to be part of someone's first foray to the stage.

Two such actors are Chris Martin, who plays Daniel, and Lucas House, who plays a storyteller.

The two had never met before the show and both said they immediately felt the sense of community and camaraderie that Tyrrell's shows are known for.

"I feel lucky to be part of this," Martin said. "He's made it really easy."

"He's the nicest guy I've ever met and he's got the biggest heart and a crazy sense of humor," House said.