



John Inchiostro tacks on the buttons and bows



SETTING THE SCENE ON STAGES

A peek behind the curtain at one of St. Louis' best-loved musical theater companies

By Margaret Bauer

When what was once a simple summer stock theater company reaches a \$3.5 million budget, at some point it hits a ceiling and of necessity heads to a higher level—and as STAGES artistic director Michael Hamilton notes, “We hit that ceiling a decade ago.” With a Broadway-sized budget inside the Kirkwood Community Center, a space that seats 380, STAGES is seriously puttin’ on the ritz.

The company hopes to move into a new \$31 million facility in Chesterfield—a plan Hamilton says is “written in cellophane”—but for now, all the glitter that’s come to characterize STAGES’ musicals is put together deep in the wooded heart of Valley Park. Sets are built there, then driven out in pieces to Kirkwood, 6 miles away. Small trucks must navigate a half-paved road, past an industrial park and a box factory; the keyhole-sized stone railroad bridge guarding the entrance makes bringing in an 18-wheeler impossible.

The STAGES shops are located inside “the compound,” a set of sheds that once housed a lawn-care company. Winter visitors attempt this trip at their own peril—a flash snowstorm could easily leave everyone

stranded. It’s unclear how the cheerfully lit, run-down bar at the top of the road stays in business during the off-season.

But in the summer, the complex buzzes with an inimitable fervor, as interns and assistants arrive on-site.

Assistant production manager Serena Carvajal walks us through the “costume hut,” a tiny cottage on the premises, which packs so much into such a small space that sound is completely muffled. Bolts of fabric, bric-a-brac and supplies line the walls. The phrase that comes to mind here is “fire hazard.”

“That house is *old*,” says veteran craftsman John Inchiostro. “That wiring, you know, we plug a couple things in, and it goes *PFF!*” He cringes and knocks on wood. The occupational hazards here are small but myriad: “A lotta *flame*,” Inchiostro vamps, explaining the process of sticking on Swarovski crystals. “A lotta stickin’ yourself with pins. But we *never* stick an actor.”

Though Inchiostro is primarily a craftsman, he can nonetheless name the provenance of any costume on the rack in the next-door cutting shop. He thumbs through dresses: “Bye Bye Birdie ... Oklahoma! ... Cabaret ...” Shoes crowd the shelves; boxes of boots are stuffed under each cutting table. In

Kirkwood’s Robert G. Reim Theatre, the details matter: “You have to pay close attention to the costumes, because there’s only a certain number of feet between you and the audience, so they really focus on the details,” says Carvajal.

“You know, a couple little stones sell the *whole* show,” says Inchiostro, the redhead momentarily resembling *Moulin Rouge* impresario Harry Zidler. “A little sparkle, and everybody goes, ‘*Yeah!*’” Carvajal pulls out a costume concept from the upcoming production of *The Music Man*, which STAGES originally performed in 1999. The old costume outfitted Eulalie Shinn, the mayor’s wife, as a rather demure Statue of Liberty—but the 2008 version boasts loud, all-American crimson and cerulean.

Similar flamboyance can be found in master carpenter Chris Phillips’ scene shop. This summer’s production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, for instance, will feature a prime example of STAGES’ scenic prowess: a programmable fiber-optic star-drop that can display hundreds of stars, light up just one star or even spell out words.

This may be local theater, but it’s clearly ready to explode onto a much bigger stage.

STAGES ST. LOUIS opens its 22nd season May 30 with *Thoroughly Modern Millie* at the Kirkwood Community Center’s Robert G. Reim Theatre, 111 S. Geyer, Kirkwood. Tickets can be purchased by calling 314-821-2407.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETE NEWCOMB