

## University of Alabama students to perform "42nd Street"



Sometimes stories are meant to be fun. Sometimes singing, dancing and having the audience whistling a tune days after seeing the show is the director's goal. That is what the University of Alabama Department of Theatre and Dance is hoping to accomplish with its production of the "42nd Street."

"42nd Street" is set in 1933 and follows naive, starry-eyed Peggy Sawyer, whose dream is to make it on Broadway. Peggy lands a chorus part in the play within the play, "Pretty Lady," then has to take on the lead when the star is injured. It's based on a novel by Bradford Ropes, which became a classic 1933 film, with choreography by Busby Berkeley and music by Harry Warren with lyrics by Al Dubin. The 1980 musical, using Warren and Dubin's score, became a long-running Broadway hit, leading up to the now-iconic line: "You're going out there a youngster, but you've got to come back a star!"

A story that is about pushing toward making dreams come true is reality for most of the cast, including UA senior Tara Lynn Steele, who plays Peggy. Steele will be graduating in May and moving to New York City.

"I'm the girl that holds on to a dream and pushes herself towards it no matter what obstacle comes in her way, and that's definitely what Peggy does," Steele said.

"If you dream big, you can succeed" is one of the themes, said Stacy Alley, "42nd Street" director and choreographer.

"(The cast) can identify with that eagerness of wanting to succeed," Alley said.

Steele, who has been dancing since age 2 and acting since age 9, said she is excited because this is the first UA musical she's had the lead in.

"It's really exciting to have a number to myself where I command the entire stage, standing center stage alone, and I'm not dancing. I just stand there and deliver a song," she said.

Unlike most of the characters she has played in the past, Steele said Peggy wavers between ditzy and naive.

"It's the first role that I've played that's not the super-intellectual type," Steele said.

Daniel Velasquez, who has been acting since he was 17 years old, plays Billy Lawlor, the male tenor lead in "Pretty Lady." Both he and Billy are both generally smiley people, he said.

"He's kind of carefree, but gets his work done. He has fun doing what he does for a living; I like that about him," Velasquez said.

The huge dance numbers excite the cast.

"'42nd Street' is really about just spreading the joy and sharing the art of performing because it's a show within a show. It's sharing the joy of art within the theater," Steele said.

With a cast of 40 and a total crew of 75, "42nd Street" is one of the biggest productions the department has put on.

"This is a huge production. It's a spectacle to see that many people on stage." Velasquez said.

This production features original choreography by Alley.

"The opening number is going to be the original (1980 Broadway) choreography, because I think it's important that students know that it's an important part of history, but the rest of it is my choreography. Some of it's obviously been influenced by Gower Champion's choreography, but I wanted to tackle it in my own way," Alley said.

Alley has discovered the challenges Champion might have faced with this show, which was his last and most successful show.

"Most of these (dances) are huge numbers, and I do a lot of work going into rehearsal process, I do a lot of preparation. You can prepare and you can write diagrams and you can have ideas, but when you bring it and put it on 40 people your vision can be hard to communicate," she said.

Additionally, the whole production packed up and played at the Mobile Civic Center Thursday, before moving back to Tuscaloosa for Tuesday's opening.

"We unload it, we put it back up there, rehearse, perform it, and pack it up and bring it back here." Alley said. UA's done similar road performances before, both in Mobile and Montgomery, with "Showboat" and "Big River."

Ironically, one of the UA cast actually suffered an injury during preparation.

"If there's a theme that's more relevant, it's 'the show must go on,'" Alley said. And the local production also dealt with challenges brought on by an upcoming tour.

"Some of our students missed some of the rehearsals in order to go to New York to audition for the national tour of '42nd Street,' so it's really cool that they got to do that," Alley said.

Alley wants the audience to leave humming a tune from the show, entertained and satisfied they've experienced something spectacular right here in Tuscaloosa.

"There's a line in the script where (a character) calls musical comedy 'the most glorious

words in the English language,' " she said. "It's simply a love letter to musical comedy."