

NO HORISING AROUND

With the help of the community, South Eugene takes a production of Carousel to new heights

Near Amazon and 19th is a theater that seats 1,000 people — it is the second largest theater in Eugene. Its cavernous room glows warmly from the theater lights hitting the sea of red velvet seats. The elegant curve of the stage leads the eye to a custom-welded circular light piece, twinkling as it hangs above four candy-colored carousel horses — the quartet is hand-carved and painted, and worth \$60,000. The theater director and his leading cast gather in the aisle, chattering about the opening night of their production, *Carousel*, on Feb. 21. This is South Eugene High School (SEHS) and this is what a high school musical looks like.

“Of all Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musicals, it’s my favorite,” says Pat Avery, director and head of SEHS’s robust theater program that includes over 160 students working in stagecraft, lighting, sound management and design and, of course, acting. Six of *Carousel*’s lead cast gathers around Avery and Paige Clark, a parent volunteer. Avery explains that *Carousel* is a difficult production because of the domestic abuse between the lead characters.

“It was challenging to talk about in the middle of the 20th century,” Avery says. “They were ahead of their time.”

“They didn’t even call it domestic abuse yet,” Clark says. The actors nod. They have been in rehearsal for more than seven weeks, clocking in three hours a day.

“You have these characters and there’s a lot about them not to like,” Avery says.

“I say that when he hit me, it didn’t hurt,” Liza Clark says of the rationalizations of her lead character, Julie Jordan, who is physically abused by Julie’s love interest, carousel barker Billy Bigelow. “Of course I don’t agree with it. We don’t agree.” Spencer Hansen, who plays Billy Bigelow, adds that as a cast, they’ve been discussing characters’ motivations and justifications for months. “It’s been a journey getting to that point,” he says.

Another part of the journey was acquiring the equine stars of the show, the four carousel horses loaned from Salem’s Riverfront Carousel project, where the horses are crafted by volunteers and funded by donors. Paige Clark, who had been visiting the Riverfront Carousel project for years with her family, made the request, and to her surprise, they said yes. One of the project’s master carvers, Bill Mills, got involved and came to SEHS on Feb. 13 to teach art classes about the carousel craft.

“We like to reach out to anyone who is interested,” says Mills, who has been carving for 54 years. He says that one to 12 artisans create each horse over a span of 1,200 to 1,400 hours, and no two horses are alike. On Sunday, Feb. 24, Mills will return to SEHS for a presentation of the carousel horses — an event that is free and open to the public. ■

Carousel shows at 7:30 pm Feb. 21-23 and March 1-2, and 2:30 pm Feb. 24 and March 3, at South Eugene High School; \$8-\$12, call 790-8070 for more information. Master carver Bill Mills will present 12:30 to 1:30 pm Feb. 24 at SEHS.



SPENCER HANSON AS ‘BILLY BIGELOW’ AND LIZA CLARK AS ‘JULIE JORDAN’ IN *CAROUSEL*

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