

Stage:

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choral performance. Several students tested positive for COVID-19, and the show was postponed two weeks to Feb. 25 and 26. That delay pushed “A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder,” a stage musical planned to open March 10, into EOU’s fall term.

“It’s exciting to be back and yet it’s frustrating at the same time. The biggest problem with bringing theater back is COVID is still doing everything it can to prevent it from coming back,” said Ken Wheeler, associate professor of theater at EOU. “As much as things are getting better and we’re seeing the sun at the end of the storm, it’s still affecting it.”

For tickets to “We’ve Got Your Number,” visit www.eou.edu/music.

Returning to the stage during a pandemic requires flexibility and creativity.

When the pandemic hit, the Elgin Opera House’s spring 2020 production of “Matilda” was only weeks away from opening. Instead of opening that March, the show was postponed for a year and a half.

In between, the Opera House tried outdoor productions as well as a fully recorded production of “High School Musical Jr.” During this musical, rehearsed in the winter of 2021, actors were split into cohort groups that rehearsed and recorded on



Eastern Oregon University students rehearse “We’ve Got Your Number” on Jan. 26, 2022. After a delay due to COVID-19 cases among the cast, performances are set for Feb. 25 and 26 at McKenzie Theatre in La Grande.

Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

different days with no live audience.

“When we announced we were recording ‘High School Musical,’ we thought we’d get just a few people audition,” said Terry Hale, Elgin Opera House executive artistic director. “We had 70 or 80 kids from five different counties. That’s how important this is.”

Hermiston High School also saw large participation numbers with “Beauty and the Beast,” a show they’ve been rehearsing since the middle of November.

“(I wish people knew) how hard these students work and how much time, effort and talent are needed to put a full show together,” Bemrose said. “It takes weeks to learn lines, music, choreography, organize props and set, and get all of the moving pieces together, including the orchestra, who rehearse separately and join us during our dress rehearsal week. We rehearse at least two hours after school during our production months, and dress rehearsal week we rehearse after school four to five hours

finalizing everything.” Those hundreds of hours do not include the extra pandemic struggle of rehearsing with masks or returning to the stage after a two-year hiatus.

“Everyone is out of practice with the process, but we’ll work at overcoming those handicaps just so we can put the show on,” Wheeler said. “There’s nothing that beats a live shared experience in a darkened theater. That communication between the actors and the audience, there’s nothing

that compares to that. We’re striving to get back to that as soon as possible even if we have to take strange precautions to be able to do it. It’s worth it.”

In Baker City, Eastern Oregon Regional Theatre has presented a few shows — the children’s theater presented “Jungle Book” in the fall of 2021, and “Pride & Prejudice” wrapped up a two-weekend run Feb. 20.

“Because theater is known as collaborative art, it was one of the few art forms almost totally shut down

during the pandemic,” said Abby Dennis, EORT artistic director. “Since our art form requires being around others, theater people were completely cut off from being able to work through the overwhelming emotions from the past two years.”

Bemrose said seeing a show come together is the greatest reward of theater, along with how accomplished the cast and crew feel. Hale said it is the way the performing arts bring joy and life to those on and off the stage.

“As a society, we focused so much on being afraid of death (in the pandemic) that we stopped doing the things that brought us joy, the things that made us alive,” Hale said. “One of the best ways to celebrate life is through the arts. If people keep coming out, we’ll keep doing it.”

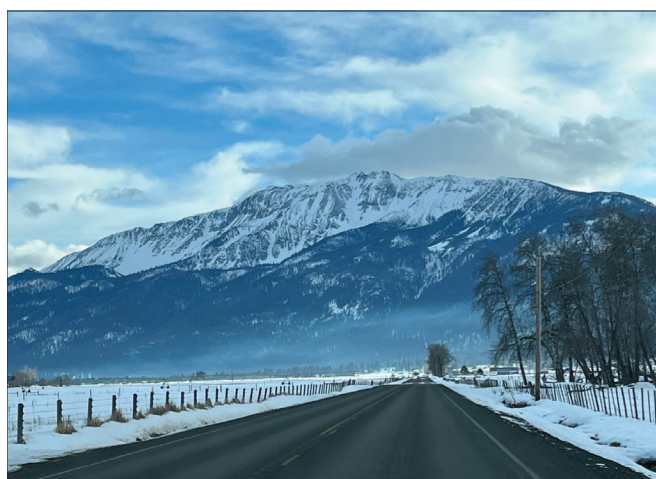
Dennis said returning to the stage is “bittersweet.”

“I love being able to entertain my community, but it hurts to think of everything we’ve lost over the past two years,” she said.

EORT’s 2022 schedule includes “Women Playing Hamlet,” “God of Carnage,” and the children’s theater will present “The Enchanted Bookshop” and “Macbeth.”

In Pendleton, tickets are still available for “Little Women” for shows March 3-5. For information, go to www.elginoperahouse.com.

“It’s going to be an amazing show,” Marshall said. “Come fall in love with these sisters and have a great night of theater again — finally.”



Katy Nesbitt/For EO Media Group

Weeks of subfreezing temperatures have held snow in the higher elevations of Northeastern Oregon, as is evident in this February 2022 photo of the Wallowa Mountains. Despite reasonable snowpack levels in the high country, however, most of the region still is facing severe drought conditions.

Drought:

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below normal precipitation and has 55 inches of snowpack with a 33% snow water equivalent.

While the snowpack and water levels look pretty good right now, Northeastern Oregon is facing down the barrel of another drought year, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. According to www.drought.gov, Wallowa County was down 0.69 inches of precipitation in January. The entire county is considered to be in severe drought status, and 44.36%

of the county is experiencing extreme drought conditions.

Union County is down 0.27 inches of its average precipitation. The entire county is considered to be under severe drought conditions while 4.3% is experiencing extreme drought. And Umatilla County is down 0.2 inches of precipitation from a normal January. This puts all of the county under severe drought conditions, with 33.77% considered to be under extreme drought conditions.

The extended forecast for Northeastern Oregon calls for 33% to 40% below normal precipitation with a 40% to 50% chance of above normal temperatures.

Flood:

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is grant-funded and the city is hoping to work with the Umatilla County Water and Soil Conservation District to secure more federal funding to fortify the banks of the creek.

The Umatilla River is a different beast entirely.

Unlike McKay Creek, the Umatilla is undammed and without a reservoir. Corbett said the most direct method of mitigation would be to install a dam, but the environmental impacts of such a move make it an unlikely option. He said more plausible solutions include extending the city’s levee system to the area near the Highway 11 bridge and raising home foundations to better withstand flood waters.

But before the city can take any long-term steps to better protect people and property during the next flood, it first needs to update its floodplain maps. Residents and property owners learned the maps were not accurate after areas flooded that were supposed to be outside the floodplain.

Corbett said the city is in the process of obtaining aerial mapping of the town, but also would need computer flood simulations and approval from the Federal Emergency Management Agency before



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Merle Meacham, left, talks from the porch of his home with neighbor Crystal Shorts on Feb. 7, 2020. Both residents stayed at Hall’s Trailer Park on Feb. 6, despite evacuation orders. According to Meacham, the water levels never rose higher than his steps and he was able to hunker down in relative comfort inside his home.

it could update the maps.

Pendleton wasn’t the only community the 2020 floods hit hard. The Umatilla Indian Reservation, Echo and the area surrounding Milton-Freewater all saw significant damage. In the latter’s case, Umatilla County Commissioner Dan Dorran said there still are people who live along Mill Creek and the south fork of the Walla Walla River who haven’t been able to return to their homes.

Dorran has been a part of a multi-agency group trying to coordinate the recovery effort, but the pace of progress has been slow. Dorran said the recovery’s deliberate

timeline can be a tough sell to constituents.

“It’s been frustrating how long it’s taken,” he said.

Dorran referenced the Thorn Hollow Bridge, a bridge east of Pendleton that was heavily damaged during the floods and has remained unusable since then. Dorran said plans are ready and the funding is in place to replace the bridge, but construction can’t start until the county gets the green light from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and other government agencies. Dorran added he expects CTUIR to complete its review of the project soon.

At its peak, the flooding caused the Umatilla River to flow at more than 20,000 cubic feet per second, the most in the river’s recorded history.

After the flood, the city updated its “Flood Fight Procedures” to give city staff a clear plan whenever the next flood comes. Included in the plan is a detailed list of procedures for when water levels reach 9,500, 12,000 and 16,000 cfs. In the event water levels exceed 22,000 cfs, the plan only has a single sentence.

“Initiate recommendation evacuation procedures behind the levee.”



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