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Rock operas, concept albums and more color theatrical performances across the area

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For theater aficionados, one local production won't be just another brick in the wall.

Hazleton-based theatrical group, Backstage Production Ensemble, is bringing Pink Floyd's "The Wall" to Hazleton.

"It's the first one of its kind," Backstage Production Ensemble's Artistic Director Joelle Witner said.

"The Wall" is a concept album put together by Pink Floyd and originally released in late 1979. It topped the Billboard charts for 15 weeks in 1980. It was written by the band's bassist, Roger Waters, and revolves around a main character named Pink. Waters then turned the album into a screenplay and it was subsequently released as a film in 1982.

Both the album and the film chronicle the life of a rock star named Pink, who builds a metaphorical wall around himself in order to protect himself from the outside world.

"There are versions of Pink Floyd's 'The Wall' live where Roger Waters does little vignettes from the movie," Witner said, "but he has never taken it to the stage where the character plays their role throughout the whole show and they sing the parts of the song that's meant for them."

Having little script to work with proved challenging for Witner and her husband, Steve, who is co-directing the show.

"Typically when we do a show, we're given: 'Here's how you produce it; here's how you put it on,'" Joelle said. "This was all on us."

According to Joelle, more than half of the movie had to be reworked.

"Our focus was to make people feel for him (Pink)," Steve said, "to hopefully be in his shoes ... to get how a good guy goes bad."

And while Joelle describes the show as "edgy," because of the adult themes, Backstage Productions tried to keep the show PG-13.

"We're usually pretty family-friendly," Joelle said, "Not to say that this isn't family-friendly, but the content is a little more out there."

Joelle also said that because most of the dancers are under 18, they were especially concerned with the content of the show.

“We made it that if you have a 4-year-old, it’s still going to be safe to bring them,” Steve said. “It’s not going to be pornographic.”

All nudity and “lewd conduct” have been taken out of the show.

In doing a edgier show than typical for the Hazleton area, Joelle said she expects more of a diverse crowd than Backstage typically has.

“I think (the audience) is going to be a little bit mixed,” Joelle said. “I think it will mostly be thirty- and fortysomethings that grew up with this music.”

Joelle said the group is looking forward to next year when it also plans to bring an edgier show to the Hazleton stage.

“Our next year ... we definitely have family-friendly shows like ‘Annie’ and ‘Fiddler on the Roof’ planned,” Joelle said, “but yet we’re doing ‘Sweeney Todd,’ which is on-the-edge.”

However, don’t discount family-oriented productions said Judianne McGrogan, producer/director with MPB Community Players and advisor of the Hazleton Area High School Drama Club.

“Our tradition has been to stick with family shows,” McGrogan said. “We have a serious feeling that family-orientated shows are important to theater.”

McGrogan said there is an audience in the area for family friendly productions.

“I know that our audiences are looking for that type of show,” McGrogan said.

Don Murray, who is directing the Nuremburg Community Players’ fall production, said his group also tries to vary the types of shows.

“In the spring we do a musical and we try to keep that family-friendly,” Murray said.

However, the fall productions at times are more adult-oriented.

This fall, the group is preparing for the Michael Parker comedy, “Hotbed Hotel.”

“It’s like a ‘Three’s Company,’” Murray said. “A very physical comedy show.”

Murray said that while the group doesn’t strive to do edgy shows, “It’s nice to bring new shows into the area.”

New, edgier shows helps local theater, according to Mike Marone, artistic director for Pennsylvania Theatre of Performing Arts.

“I think it’s great because it expands your audience,” Marone said. “You’re exposing a whole new demographic to theater.”

Marone pointed out that getting someone in the theater to see one production might lead them to return for productions they wouldn’t typically have attended.

PTPA puts on shows including comedies, youth productions and musicals.

“We try to make sure the season is balanced,” Marone said, “so that there is something on there for everyone.”

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