

The 'Eyes' have it in benefit production at Kelsey

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When the homegrown musical "Through Our Eyes" made its debut at Mercer County Community College's Kelsey Theatre in September 2006, it was thought of as a one-time extra, a season opener for the busy college theater.

But when it sold out and garnered strong responses from its astonished audience, it was clear that the fledgling show would have to come back. Now, "Through Our Eyes" is back for the third time, with a cast of 70. Moreover, the show is preparing to go on the road -- taking its inspiring message about disabled people to new audiences.

Of the cast of 70," says writer-director-composer Alan Rosen, "about half are ... school kids and adults who have done theater with area groups, but the other half are children, young adults and older folks who have various disabilities, ranging from paralysis and cerebral palsy to deafness, blindness and autism -- and believe me, they are just as enthusiastic and as hardworking as any theater pro."

On the stage at rehearsal, some cast members walk with a cane, walker or crutches, and one performer pushes another in a wheelchair. But there is no embarrassment or attempt to hide the disabilities on stage. In fact, one of the hit numbers of the show is the jaunty tune "Me and My Wheelchair," delivered by assistant director Chris Heffron.

Taking on disabilities as a subject is a natural for Rosen, who has for several years taught performing arts to disabled students in junior and senior high school at the Mercer County Special Services School District -- located adjacent to the county college.

"New Jersey is one of the best states for educating the disabled," Rosen observes. "I know some people who have moved to New Jersey in order to get educational support for their children through the excellent programs."

The theater programs in particular do more than train bodies and minds. They develop confidence and self-esteem in disabled students and allow them to see themselves literally in different roles.

"When they are on stage," Rosen notes, "they play a character, and they really get into it. Thus they could be a student, a teacher, a parent, a sibling, a coach. It all leads to greater understanding and acceptance of oneself. And it prepares them to do real jobs in the world."

In the musical number "Jobs," the players jokingly sing about the simple, menial tasks they are often assigned at work. Miming tasks such as sweeping the floor or being a "greeter," they talk about their actual school classes in computer science or graphic arts.

In another scene with almost the entire cast on stage, a disappointed baseball team discusses that afternoon's loss. When one player chastises the coach for letting a disabled player come to bat at a crucial point -- who then struck out -- the group argues about what is important: winning or playing? One player contends, "You can never be sure you're not going to strike out."

"Great!" moans the disgruntled player, played by Brandon Maxwell, "We've got deaf people playing for us. We might as well have blind people playing on our team."

With that, Hakeen Barchue, who is blind, pipes up with just the laugh that is needed to break the tension: "Good. Then I can pitch the next game."

"Through Our Eyes" came about as a partnership between Rosen and the not-for-profit Allies, Inc., established in 1999 by Krystal Odell and Elise Gambino to help provide employment, residential and advocacy services for New Jersey's disabled. The funds raised from the show will support the Club House program, a follow-up to public aid for the disabled.

"Through Our Eyes," is part of a fund-raising weekend, with the musical tonight, a magic show starring Mark Robinson at 2 p.m. tomorrow for the kids and an adult magic show at 8 p.m. tomorrow night. To top it all off, there will be a "Danceathon" from midnight Saturday to 5 a.m. Sunday.

The cast of "Through Our Eyes" performed some of their numbers at the United Nations in March. The Kelsey Theatre website cites the U.N. reaction: "The cast was magnificent because their souls shined through their music. There wasn't a person in the room who did not walk away changed forever in the way they will look at others."

"We now have quite a few agencies and groups around the state interested in hosting our show," says Rosen, noting the troupe will be taking it on the road in the coming year. "We can do the whole show, or a shorter version, depending on the audience age and venue."

But for the current cast of "Through Our Eyes," tonight at Kelsey is the big one. This is where they started three years ago, and as everyone knows, "Third time's the charm."