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'Children Of Eden'

Musical Take On The Book Of Genesis Comes To Freeman's Schmeckfest

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FREEMAN — This year's Schmeckfest is performing a musical of Biblical proportions.

"Children of Eden" hits the stage during the next two weekends, part of the annual "tasting festival" on the Freeman Academy campus.

The two-act musical, featuring music and lyrics by Stephen Schwartz and the book by John Caird, is based on familiar stories from the book of Genesis. The first act tells the story of Adam and Eve, along with Cain and Abel. The second act tells the story of Noah and the flood.

"Although I had never seen 'Children of Eden' staged, when I recommended it as a Schmeckfest musical, I had listened to the soundtrack for several years and felt it was a good fit for us," said director Tim L. Waltner.

The musical will be presented at 8 p.m. each night of the festival March 21-22 and 28-29. An encore performance is scheduled for March 27, but there are no other Schmeckfest activities that day. "Children of Eden" is coming to the Schmeckfest stage for the first time since musicals were introduced in 1970 as part of the festival.

Waltner is no stranger to the Schmeckfest musical tradition. "Children of Eden" marks his eighth time as a director. He has been involved as director, actor or on the technical side of 37 previous Schmeckfest productions.

"What drew me to the show is the music. It's delightful, interesting and listenable. That's not surprising, given that Stephen Schwartz also wrote 'Godspell,' 'Pippin' and 'Wicked,' which are more well-known," he said.

"Like 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat,' staged for Schmeckfest in 2009, this show features a variety of musical styles. It's fun, and I think it will play well."

"Children of Eden" is also similar to "Joseph" in another aspect, Waltner said.

"The stories are familiar — Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel in Act I and Noah and the ark in Act II — and people know how things turn out," he said. "There are no plot surprises. But I like the way this show goes about telling those stories, with a strong emphasis on choral music."

The musical may be less familiar than past Schmeckfest productions, but Waltner found no problem drawing a cast and crew from a large region surrounding Freeman. In fact, some members adjusted their personal lives to become part of the production.

"We have three folks in the show who timed

extended visits to Freeman so they could be part of this show," he said. "They've been wonderful assets to the company."

THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

Putting on a show of truly Biblical proportions can be daunting — but it can also be liberating, Waltner said.

"One of the challenges of the musical is the staging, particularly when you're doing it in a gym that's temporarily converted to a theater," he said. "One could make it huge spectacle — a lush garden and a huge ark. We've gone with a basic, simpler, bit more abstract set. That's something that Stephen Schwartz actually advises in his notes about this production. He says, focus on the music and the stories and let that carry the show."

Costuming — or the lack of it — can also bring some creative decisions, Waltner said.

"I've had a few folks ask how we're dealing with Adam and Eve, who as written in Genesis, were naked in the Garden," he said. "We're essentially (using a) concept, where Father (the production's reference for God) is the only person in the show who's dressed in white, and that represents His purity. Since He created Adam and Eve in His own image, they begin the show dressed in white similar to Father."

Waltner drew together a mix of Schmeckfest veterans and novices, which has created an interesting blend.

"We have a very solid company with a nice balance of seasoned experienced actors and some newcomers. It's always fun to see a new talent emerge on stage," he said. "The cast is relatively small for a show this big, but the chorus of Storytellers provides narration, sets the mood and helps amplify what's happening on-stage musically."

"In many respects, the Storytellers are the biggest 'character' of the show. Incidentally, the actors who portray Adam's family are part of the Storytellers in Act 2, and those who portray Noah's family are part of the Storytellers in Act 1."

The chorus appears in more than half the scenes, Waltner said. In many ways, the show requires a choir rather than a chorus of actors, he added.

"Because of the demanding music, I felt we needed a little extra time to prepare the storytellers," he said. "We cast the show in December

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Charles Fink plays the character of Father in "Children of Eden," this year's musical production at Freeman's Schmeckfest. Stephen Schwartz, who wrote the musical, chose to identify God as "Father" to reinforce the theme of the show — that is, the relationship between parent and child, and that all are born with free will and make decisions that matter. (Photo: Jeremy Waltner)

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7:00 PM GREAT PLAINS WRITERS TOUR - CHARLES BOWDEN AND MOLLY MOLLOY - MARIAN AUDITORIUM
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