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"Songs for a New World": Not your average high school musical

When it came time for Ithaca High School senior Emily Behrmann-Fowler to choose a project for her WISE (Wise Individualized Student Experience) class, she knew exactly what she wanted to do: stage a musical theater production.

"I've been singing since I could talk, practically," she said. "I've always been really involved in the theater community, through the school and Running to Places. When it was time to choose a project, I knew I wanted it to be something to do with music. And I thought that putting on a musical would be an interesting way to see a side of something that I don't normally see, because I'm not usually on the production side."

Behrmann-Fowler decided to produce Jason Robert Brown's acclaimed Off-Broadway show "Songs for a New World," which was first staged in 1995. And after a semester of hard work, she and her cast of fellow Ithaca High School students are ready to raise the curtain for three performances this weekend at the Lehman Alternative Community School's Black Box Theater.

Why "Songs for a New World"?

"I heard a lot of the songs before, and I had always loved them," Behrmann-Fowler said. "The music is just brilliant, really well done. And I didn't want to choose a show that had too large of a cast, which would make it too unmanageable."

"The subject matter is also really great for a senior project," she continued, "because the whole theme of the show is 'the moment before everything changes.' In a whole clichéd sort of way, most of us are seniors and it's the moment before we go out into the world and everything changes for us. So it's really applicable."

Not only is she producing "Songs for a New World," Behrmann-Fowler is also performing in the show along with IHS classmates Kevin Hilgartner, Jenna Ledet, Saia Meyerhoff, and Caroline Sendek and Junior St. John Faulkner.

"Everyone is really experienced, and has been a part of school shows, Running to Places shows, and some of them have been on stage at the Hangar Theatre and

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Kitchen Theatre,' she said. "The original show was written for only four people, but we decided to expand it to make it not so demanding on ourselves. Things fell into place—they're all such great people and responsible and so talented and professional about it all. It all came together really well."

The entire cast is co-directing the show. "We all have equal standing in terms of the blocking and stage directions, which is nice because it's a really collaborative process," Behrmann-Fowler said.

The show will be presented with minimal set and props. "The show is really a basic show, very conceptual in a way, because the songs aren't connected through the plot at all," she said. "Each song takes place someplace else, and it's more about the theme than anything.

"The show has classically been done with not a lot of set, which is another reason why we thought it would be perfect for us. We have a few set pieces, like a couple of large blocks that we base a lot of our staging around, and a couple of stools. We do have some costume pieces we bring in to help enhance the different numbers, but in general it's been really nice to keep it very simple."

The students have been working on the show all semester. "I started doing research back in January, and we started rehearsing in March," Behrmann-Fowler said. "But it's been hard, because we're six high-schoolers, so our schedules are busy and we don't always have transportation."

While the WISE class emphasizes hands-on experience and learning new things, Behrmann-Fowler has also been the beneficiary of some helpful advice. "I have talked to a lot of professionals in the field," she said. "And I have a mentor, Nathan Parker, the choir teacher at Boynton Middle School, who has done a ton of musicals in the past, and he's been hugely helpful."

The production received grants from the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) and the Fine Arts Booster Group. Behrmann-Fowler also credits several area businesses for their support or providing rehearsal space: Carol Bushberg Real Estate, McBooks Press, La Tourelle, Communique Design and Marketing Inc., Purity Ice Cream, Ceremonies and Events Planning of the Finger Lakes and the Danby Federated Church.

There will be three performances of "Songs for a New World": 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and at 2 p.m. Sunday. Admission is free, though a \$5 donation is suggested. The Lehman Alternative Community School

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is at 111 Chestnut St. on Ithaca's west hill.

Behrmann-Fowler acknowledged that staging a musical theater production has required a huge amount of effort.

"It's been a lot more than I originally thought it would be going into the process. If I had known how much work it would have been, I wouldn't have done it. So it's good I didn't know," she said with a big laugh.

If You Go

What: 'Songs For A New World'

Where: Lehman Alternative Community School, 111 Chestnut St.

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday & Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

Cost: Free; \$5 donation suggested

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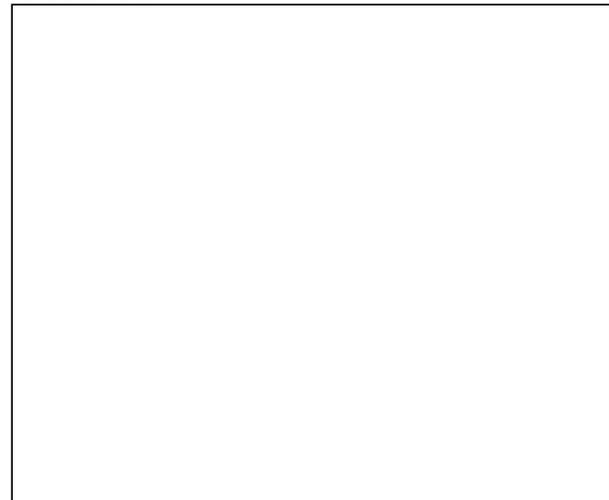
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