

BC3 actors to stage deadly funny “Arsenic and Old Lace”

Nephew’s discovery of toxic wine-serving aunts a laughing matter for Pioneer Players

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Butler County Community College’s Pioneer Players will perform the 1939 play “Arsenic and Old Lace” on Nov. 22 and Nov. 23 in Succop Theater on BC3’s main campus in Butler Township. Among members of the Pioneer Players are, top row, from left, Morgan Alter, Jack Baldauff, Shane Denial and Jacob Hecht. Bottom row, from left, Elijah Minter, Elizabeth Rettig-Seitam, Amanda Sgurakis and Ethan Skinner.

(Butler, PA) Behind their sweet exteriors, serial killers. Within their living room chest, another victim. Inside Butler County Community College’s Succop Theater this month, the dramatic comedy of poisoned-wine-serving elderly sisters, a body-burying nephew who believes he’s Teddy Roosevelt and a newly engaged nephew trying to make sense after discovering his family’s insanity.

The Pioneer Players, BC3’s theater group and at 30 years old the college’s longest-running student club, have been rehearsing since September for their performance of Joseph Kesselring’s

1939 play “Arsenic and Old Lace,” scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Nov. 22 and for 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Nov. 23.

The 135-minute show will be staged in three acts with a 15-minute intermission between Act I and Act II.

Tickets cost \$8 for adults and \$5 for students, and can be purchased online at bc3.edu/theater, by calling 724-284-8505, or at the door.



Elijah Minter, left, and Ethan Skinner, members of Butler County Community College’s Pioneer Players, are shown rehearsing for the 1939 play “Arsenic and Old Lace” on Friday, Nov. 1, 2019, on the stage of Succop Theater on BC3’s main campus in Butler Township. The Pioneer Players will perform the play Nov. 22 and Nov. 23.

Morgan Alter, of Sarver, portrays the domineering Martha Brewster while Amanda Sgourakis, of Lower Burrell, plays the submissive Abby Brewster – homicidal sisters who lure lonely men to their demise through a sign promising female companionship and placed in the window of their Brooklyn home.

“Arsenic and Old Lace” is “incredibly well-written” said Larry Stock, director of BC3’s Cultural Center and who with Mike Beck, BC3 events specialist, is an adviser to the Pioneer Players. “It’s funny. Some of the lines that Martha and Abby have are hysterical.”

Martha and Abby take in old men who are “very lonely,” Alter said, “and are hoping to help them in a way to not feel lonely anymore.”

By serving them poisoned homemade elderberry wine.

“That,” Alter said, “is what they do.”

What they do may have audience members asking of themselves, “That’s actually happening right now?” Sgourakis said, her voice rising with disbelief. “But it’s very funny.”

Roles were chosen after two days of actors’ auditions in September, Beck said.

Jacob Hecht, of Cranberry Township, portrays newly engaged Mortimer Brewster, and Ethan Skinner, of Valencia, Teddy Brewster – each a nephew of Abby and Martha.

“Teddy is the one who’s insane,” Beck said. “He thinks he’s Teddy Roosevelt.”

Skinner has practiced for Teddy by speaking into a device that records voice intonations that in one line necessitate the determined oration of Roosevelt, who believes the bodies he’s burying in his aunts’ basement are yellow fever victims of the Panama Canal project during his presidency, and in the next line, the gullibility of an agreeable adolescent.

“I have learned that inflection is so important in terms of what mood I am trying to portray,” Skinner said. “(Teddy Brewster) is very petulant. So when I am acting like a child, my voice needs to sound more childish. When I am presidential, I need to sound more stern.

“Teddy is such a fun character because he has two sides to him. Most of the time he is very presidential and strong because he is playing Teddy Roosevelt. But really he is just a big kid who gets excited about things like toys and food from his aunts.”

After announcing his wedding engagement in his aunts’ home, Mortimer, a writer, looks for materials in a living room chest and, Hecht said, “discovers the body. Immediately his mind goes to, ‘Oh, no! Teddy is the one who did this.’ Teddy has issues up in his head thinking he is Theodore Roosevelt. Mortimer calls his aunts in. He starts freaking out. Eventually, his aunts tell him they are the ones who did this instead of Teddy.

“And that,” Hecht said of Mortimer, “causes his world to spiral.”

Cast members include Jack Baldauff, of Gibsonia, as the Rev. Dr. Harper and as Officer O’Hara; Shane Denial, of Mars, as Mr. Witherspoon; Mackenzie Elmer, of Butler, as Lt. Rooney; Wolfgang Gaiser, of Butler, as Mr. Gibbs; Eric Homa, of Renfrew, as Dr. Einstein; Ashton Huff, of Slippery Rock, as Elaine Harper; Elijah Minter, of Kittanning, as Jonathan Brewster; Elizabeth Rettig-Seitam, of Kittanning, as Officer Brophy; and Samantha Tanner, of West Sunbury, as Officer Klein.

Stock, Beck and Gaiser will direct the play.



Larry Stock, left, director of Butler County Community College’s Cultural Center, and Mike Beck, BC3’s events specialist, are advisers of the Pioneer Players, which will perform the 1939 play “Arsenic and Old Lace” on Nov. 22 and Nov. 23 in Succop Theater on BC3’s main campus in Butler Township.