

Chemeketa puts on 1950s musical

"Bye Bye Birdie" will open Thursday.

RON COWAN
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It was the era when big stars ruled television, kids and parents couldn't communicate, rock stars dazzled the public and smart promoters exploited everyone's fantasies.

"Bye Bye Birdie," which opens Thursday at Chemeketa Community College, might as well be about 2004 as about the late '50s, figures director Ted Desel: Not much has changed.

The vintage musical satire may deal with TV star Ed Sullivan and a thinly veiled version of Elvis Presley, here called Conrad Birdie, but many of the central themes hit home in the 21st century.

The Charles Strousse/ Lee Adams musical was filmed with Dick Van Dyke and Ann-Margret in 1963 and reprised in a TV production in 1995 with Jason Alexander and Vanessa Williams.

Still, the mind-sets of the 1950s are a little out of reach for some of his young cast members, Desel said.

"They cannot understand the innocence of that time," he said. "It's hard for them to grasp that some of the things they talk about are innocent, fun and believable."

Although we do have "American Idol" and its brand of instant celebrities, "The Ed Sullivan Show" was a musical variety show, a now-dead TV species.

The musical juxtaposes two stories.

Blair Loving plays Albert Peterson, a struggling agent whose client, rock star Birdie (Barry Murphy), has been drafted.

In an effort to generate some publicity, Albert arranges for Birdie to give "one last kiss" to a lucky member of his fan club, drawn at random.

The lucky girl, Kim Macafee (Tia Luber) of Sweet Apple, Ohio, is thrilled, though it creates problems with her boyfriend.

Her worried parents, Mr. and Mrs. Macafee (Randy Boyd and Terri Swanson), are at least happy that the kiss will take place on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

In a major subplot, commitment-shy Albert has a controlling mother, Mae Peterson (Ruby Sue Whitley), which is getting in the way of his romantic relationship with his assistant, Rosie Alvarez (Emily Eikleberry).

Among the musical's best-known numbers, in addition to the title song, are "The Telephone Hour," "Kids," "One Boy," "One Last Kiss," "Put On a Happy Face" and "A Lot of Livin' To Do."

"I think in theater literature, 'Bye Bye Birdie' has a really unique place," Desel said.

"It really celebrates youth."

The musical can be seen as marking the beginning of youth culture, with its own language, dynamics and commercial possibilities, he said.

The cast of 33 features a number of high school students for authenticity.

The real stars are the older characters of Albert and Rosie, whose relationship is reshaped by the events of the story.

Loving and Eikleberry make a good team as the leads, Desel said.

"They work really well together," he said.

"There's a nice chemistry between them."

"Bye Bye Birdie" is very much a dance musical, with choreography by Dee Montgomery Smith and Matt Jenesu, who is Desel's co-director.

Terry Rhose is the technical director and set designer.

There also will be an orchestra of six, who will be seated onstage, led by Judy Dyer and Sandee Shaddock.

As with all Chemeketa theatrical productions, "Bye Bye Birdie" has to be self-sustaining, since the college doesn't budget for theater.

It also helps pay for less lucrative shows, such as "God's Country," the drama about racial supremacists.

Desel has no doubt "Bye Bye Birdie" will fill the bill for popularity, though.

"I think for the most part, people go to these shows because they like the music, they like the story, and they just want to see it," he said.

"It's kind of like 'Happy Days.'"

'Bye Bye Birdie'

When: 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday and May 20-22 with a 2 p.m. matinee May 22; the May 20 performance is signed for the deaf and hearing impaired.

Where: Building 6 Auditorium, Chemeketa Community College, 4000 Lancaster Drive NE, Salem

Cost: \$12, \$9 students and seniors

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