Above, from left, Tara Mateo of Holyoke, Vesper Soto of Springfield, Allison Smythe of Wilbraham, and Viggo Vedder of Amherst rehearse a scene from "Men On Boats." It is being staged at Holyoke Community College.

HOLYOKE

'Men On Boats' highlights diversity of HCC campus

BY CHRIS TURBO

Special to The Republican

Despite the title, there are six men and no boats in the Holyoke Community College Theatre Department's fall production of "Men On Boats."’

"Six boats, and no men, hardly," said the director, theater professor Pat Sandoval.

That is by design. The play, written by Jacky Budash, is a "true-ish" retelling of an 1869 expedition down the Green and Colorado rivers and through the Grand Canyon, viewed through a contemporary lens. A historically accurate portrayal would have demurred the 10 explorers in the four boats by playing a tableware set. According to the playwright's directions, however, "The cast should be made up entirely of people who are not.

She specifically mentions including female-identifying, racially diverse actors, as well as LGBTQ+ members or others.

"We have a wonderfully diverse population at Holyoke Community College, and I wanted to invite anybody and everybody in the spectrum to audition," Sandoval said.

The result is a 10-member, gender-fluid cast that includes 10 women and two men. All but one of the "men on boats" in the HCC production are women.

"That's just the way it turned out," Sandoval said. "We didn't have anyone who auditioned where they fit in. I just thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to cast the best student actors and not consider whether they were male or female."

"Men On Boats" will be staged today through Saturday at 7:30 p.m. in the college's Leslie Phillips Theatre, with a 2 p.m. matinee on Saturday. The Friday show will be ASL-interpreted.

Student actor Vesper Soto, of Springfield, leads the cast as Maj. John Wesley Powell, the one-eyed Civil War veteran who was commissioned by the Smithsonian Institution to captain a nine-member team to map the uncharted western terrain, record geological data, and document their encounters with indigenous people. The play chronicles their adventures—and mishaps—along the way.

Although the play is not a comedy, Sandoval said the humor in it comes from the irony of a (mostly) non-white and non-white cast playing male characters, as well as the incorporation of contemporary point of views and language. (The characters say "like" and "cool" a lot.)

"The story is more interesting with mostly women, and it's funnier," Sandoval said. "But the comedy comes from how it's apropos to slapstick or camp."

As for the boats, Sandoval said some productions of the play have actors risking their lives atop them. He takes it slow as they move around the stage, but the stage designer Matt Whalin decided to rely on the audience to imagine them.

"I believe the audience comes in ready to believe, and if the actors are doing their part, it works," Sandoval said. "We imagine them going over waterfalls, and we imagine that they'rerowning, and we all just believe. When the audience is watching, everyone is on their feet, and it's real."

The audience accepts this. So, the first scene in "Men On Boats" is on the river, and they're getting paddle, and they're paddling, and I believe the audience will go along with it.

"We have a wonderfully diverse population at Holyoke Community College, and I wanted to invite anybody and everybody on the spectrum to audition."

Pat Sandoval, Holyoke Community College theatre professor and director of Men On Boats

IF YOU GO

Event: "Men On Boats"

Where: Leslie Phillips Theatre, Holyoke Community College

When: Today, Sat, at 7:30 p.m.

Tickets: $10 general admission, $5 HCC community, $5 seniors and non-HCC students.

To purchase tickets: Call box office at 413-597-2528 or reserve tickets will be available at box office.

Special Offer

Receive a $20 gift card with in-home cleaning purchase of $200 or more! See store for details.

O'Malley, of Easthampton, as Hattie, Annie Jameson, of South Hadley, as Hannah, Baribeta Bascom, of Springfield, as D.G. Houland, the bishop; Jean-Claude Lember, of Chicopee, as Tommie, and Jocelyn Lawry, of Holyoke, as Whit, are also in the cast.

"Men On Boats" also features Cassie Soto, as John Wesley Powell; Tessa Martus, of Holyoke, as William Dunn; Virginia Wardlaw, as Ambrose; John Colton Smuts; Debra Mattison, of Springfield, as O'Malley; Grace Kelly, of Springfield, as Bradley; Allison Smith, of Wilbraham, as Serafina Howard; and Zoli Pyke, of Chicopee, as Anna.