



Above, from left, Tora Mateo of Holyoke, Vesper Soto of Springfield, Alison Smythe of Wilbraham, and Virginia Wardlaw of Amherst rehearse a scene from "Men On Boats," to be staged at Holyoke Community College. PHOTO COURTESY HCC

HOLYOKE

'Men On Boats' highlights diversity of HCC campus

By CHRIS TURKO

Special to The Republican

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

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

That is by design.

The play, written by Jaclyn Backhaus, 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 demanded the 10 explorers in the four boats be played by cisgender white men. 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 LBGTQ, nonbinary, or others.

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

The result is a 12-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.

"I didn't ask 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 Theater, 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-armed Civil War veteran who was commissioned by the Smithsonian Institute to captain a nine-member volunteer crew and map the uncharted western terrain, record geological data, and document their encounters

with indigenous people.

The play chronicles their adventures — and misadventures — along the way.

Although the play is not a comedy, Sandoval said the humor in it comes from the irony of a (mostly) non-male and non-white cast playing male characters, as well as

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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 real life as opposed to slapstick or camp."

As for the boats, Sandoval said some productions of the play have actors wearing them like aprons as they move around the stage, but she and stage designer Matt Whiton 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're starving, and we all just believe. When the audience is watching 'Romeo and Juliet,' no one stands up in the theater and yells, 'He didn't really die. Don't worry.' The audience accepts this. So, the first scene in 'Men On Boats' is them on the river, and they've got paddles, and they're paddling, and I believe the audience will go along with it."

The complete cast for "Men On Boats" includes: Soto, as John Wesley Powell; Tora Mateo, of Holyoke, as William Dunn; Virginia Wardlaw, of Amherst, as John Colton Sumner; Debra Mattoon, of Springfield, as Old Shady; Grace Kelly, of Springfield, as Bradley; Alison Smythe, of Wilbraham, as Seneca Howland; Zoë Fydenkevez, of Chicopee, as Frank Goodman; Shaina

IF YOU GO

Event: "Men On Boats"

Where: Leslie Phillips Theater, Holyoke Community College

When: Today-Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., 2 p.m.

Tickets: \$10 general admission; \$5 HCC community; \$8 seniors and non-HCC students.

To purchase tickets: Call box office at 413-552-2528 to reserve; tickets will be available at door.

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