

Senior premieres original work, 'Headvoice,' in Black Box

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Senior Reporter

It is a tradition for the performing arts department to end its season with a musical in the Black Box Theatre, but this year, it's more than just the average show. The chosen production, "Headvoice," is an original work with the script written by senior Ethan Andersen as his Elon College Fellows project.

The show is advertised as a song cycle, which is a collection of songs that have a similar theme, but according to Andersen, the show isn't a song cycle at all.

"'Headvoice' is not a song cycle. It's about someone writing a song cycle," Andersen said. "It's a linear story about a young composer who is writing a song cycle. This composer is experiencing tremendous loss and recedes back into his mind to pick up pieces and figure how he got to this point."

Andersen, who plays the composer, receives help from three voices in his head, who manifest themselves and musicalize his life. The cast and crew discussed the status of the composer's brain as it spirals into chaos as inspiration to use throughout the show.

Stage manager Jessica Edwards said "Headvoice" is different from a lot of shows the Elon community might be used to seeing, not only because it's an original work, but also because of its emotional depth and intimacy.

"It's interesting because, not only is Ethan a music director or writer and composer and the lead, but he is also playing the show," Edwards said. "It's just a piano and him and the cast. There's nothing else musically. It's all coming from him. It's a little more introspective than a lot of other musicals. Other musicals rely on flashy costumes and big tap numbers, while this is more focused on his journey. It's much more personal."

As Edwards pointed out Andersen wears a number of hats throughout this production — both working within as an actor and outside as the writer and musical director. For Andersen, this has been an exercise in trust because, while he does maintain control over a number of different aspects, he has to believe in his cast and crew to bring his story to life.

"I'm a little bit of a control freak, so this has

been a good thing for me to do," Andersen said. "This has been a great practice in trust. I chose people who share the same vision as me and who are just as on top of it as I am. It's great because I have an image with my mind, but they have a different one. With my mentors [Lynne Formato and Rick Church], it's like two artists giving me their opinion."

It would not be easy for every student to hand their original work over to someone else's director, but one of Andersen's mentors, professor Rick Church, said Andersen has the maturity to hand over control and accept critique like a professional.

"When working with writers on this level, you have to choose your words wisely, because it's very personal," Church said. "But Ethan's different. He knows how to take the adjustment and say, 'Let's explore that.' He's flexible to try things. Not everyone takes adjustments so graciously."

For the costume and scenic designer, professor Jack Smith, watching Andersen's journey from bright student to accomplished colleague has been the most rewarding part of

his involvement in the show.

"It's really exciting to work with a student," Smith said. "It's a great transition that all our students go through. They come here, start to learn and grow and produce interesting things. Then they graduate and become our colleagues. [As a senior] this is that early transition [for Andersen] from a student to being a colleague. It is so lovely to see. He is grossly talented, and it's nice to work with people who are amazingly talented no matter their age."

Student director Keith Hale echoed their sentiments, saying that not only has Andersen been a pleasure to work with, but he has also been supportive of the choices and input Hale has made as a director and a peer.

"Ethan is a good person. He's smart and he knows what's going on," Hale said. "He's very understanding. He wanted to get [the show] out of his hands and into my hands. It's been very collaborative, and we work well together. [With this original work,] it's a lot easier to make bigger choices."

Premiering as the third musical of the sea-

son is an honor for Andersen and a testament to the department's faith in him. They chose his musical before they even heard his music, and Church said this is a sign of trust of the department in Andersen.

"It's magical that his project took the spot of a regular show in our season," Church said. "Not everyone gets to do that. He got one of the three spots because the faculty said 'Yes, he can handle this.' They believe in him, and that's exciting."

Andersen said it's nice that he gets to finish his stage career at Elon with a work he's put so much time and effort into, but he said this performance isn't the end of the road.

"I'm excited for everyone to see it, but this is not the final step for the show," Andersen said. "It takes years for shows to come to full potential. It went through a workshop in 2010, and I want this to be the next step. It's great to get people's reactions on it. I want an open dialogue so I can continue to work on it."

"Headvoice" premieres at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, May 1 in the Black Box Theatre.



Ethan Andersen's cast rehearses "Headvoice," an original work with words and music written by Andersen himself for his Elon College Fellows project.

JANE SEIDEL | Staff Photographer