

“SWEENEY TODD” auditions celebrate musical theatre progress



Elon musical theatre program to host auditions for next show

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Late October will bring to McCrary stage the story of a broken barber exacting bloody revenge.

Preparation for “Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street” begins the very first week of classes, with auditions described by musical theater majors as grueling, vulnerable, and “one of the most important parts of the school year.”

Students will vie for roles in the eight-time Tony Award-winning musical during a series of vocal and dance auditions beginning with open vocal calls on Tuesday, August 28, through final callbacks on Saturday, September 1.

Vocal Audition (Tuesday evening, August 28 – Wednesday evening, August 29)

About three weeks prior to the Elon’s first day of classes, “Sweeney Todd” audition material becomes available on Moodle, and choreographer Linda Sabo enforces the boy scout motto in the department — be prepared!

From there, it’s up to the students to ready a 16-bar cut of a Stephen Sondheim or similar style song that is representative of the “Sweeney” score.

“We really need to listen to make sure people can sing it and know enough to learn the music in the time allotted during rehearsal period,” said Valerie Maze, music director and conductor, who will work alongside choreographer Linda Sabo and director Catherine McNeela to cast the show to give goosebumps.

“Musically-speaking, it’s trickier than a lot of other musicals,” Maze said.

Groups of ten students at a time will walk into Yeager Recital Hall and take a seat in the front row. One at a time, each student will perform on stage and then return to their seat until everyone has sung. After a brief moment for discussion, certain people will be asked to sing or read short snippets from the show.

“Although it’s still a formal setting, it’s much more comfortable now that I have relationships with the faculty members in the room,” said junior Andrew Purdy. “They do their best to make the room a safe space to do your best work.”

Maze came to Elon last year straight out of the professional world. She didn’t know any of the students during the first round of auditions.

“I was brand new,” Maze said. “I didn’t know one person any different from the next person. But I remem-

ber looking up there and thinking, ‘Oh my goodness. These students are so crazy talented.’ That was my first thought: ‘Wow, this is going to be harder than I thought.’”

Dance Audition (Thursday evening, August 30)

The dance auditions for “Sweeney” will have a large character element.

“I’m more interested that everyone can move well and pick up movement easily, rather than casting highly technical dancers,” Sabo said. “Sweeney Todd isn’t a technical dance show.”

Typically, everyone auditioning convenes in Scott Studios and learns a dance combination from the show. This year, in groups of three or four of their own choosing, students will perform an improv section to “God That’s Good” from Act II.

“Our job is to tell a clear story through our movement,” Purdy said. “I remember this being the most stressful part of the audition my freshman year, because it was just my third day of school and I was already having to dance in front of all of these insanely talented upper-classmen.”

Senior Michael Dikegoros had a particularly stressful first-year audition this time four years ago.

“I was so eager to be a part of the Elon music theatre community, but moving away from home, starting classes and making yourself vulnerable in front of eighty or so people that you barely just met was definitely overwhelming,” Dikegoros said.

His first day at Elon was nightmarish. During a dance class, he pulled his left hamstring.

The dance audition for the fall music was later that day.

“I did the whole dance audition in pain, but my adrenaline kicked in and I kept pushing through,” Dikegoros said. “I ended up getting lucky and was cast, but I had to take it easy in dance classes for the next month or so to give my body time to heal.”

Dikegoros isn’t the only musical theater student who has battled injury during the dance portion of an Elon audition.

“I only started dancing when I got to college, and the thought of any dance audition was incredibly nerve-racking,” said senior Kyra Gerber.

She chose a partner she trusted, and during the audition she picked up steps faster than she ever had before. She felt good about the combination. When it came time to dance in small groups, she was equally prepared and excited.

“There is a lot of pressure to do well at our auditions, and although it may only seem like the school play to someone outside of the department, it feels like the Super Bowl to us,” Gerber said.

When it came time to step out and demonstrate more technical

moves, she double-turned into a leap, launching herself into her partner’s arms. Instead, she fell to the ground, and found herself unable to move. Her partner thought she was making a character choice.

“Even in that moment, when I knew something was very wrong, I didn’t want to mess up my chances of being in the show,” Gerber said. “I looked down at my foot and it was swelling to the size of an eggplant.”

The music stopped and Gerber screamed. The room sprung to action. Classmates comforted her with ice and hand-holding, and her professors stayed by her side until the ambulance arrived.

“I found out later that while I was getting my broken foot set and cast, the audition continued,” Gerber said.

She was still healing months later during her next audition.

“I was in so much pain that I messed up about every other step,” Gerber said. “I turned it into a character who just didn’t know what she had gotten herself into. After the long grueling day of callbacks, I was cast in the show.”

Callbacks (Saturday afternoon, September 1)

The callback list and callback materials will be released on Friday, and those selected will report to the McCrary stage early on Saturday morning for callbacks — which typically last all day.

Everyone called back is asked to perform a section of the ensemble material. They are also expected to hold pitches and harmonies in small groups as they vocalize the material.

“One big thing in musical theater we look for is not only can they sing well, but can they tell a story,” Maze said. “It’s acting. We want to see how much are they communicating the story, or if they’re just singing the words — which isn’t nearly as interesting. I’d rather hear somebody make a mistake or tow, but really captivate me with their story-telling.”

Everyone called back for principle roles will sing the material assigned to them, and then, after a break, they will read dialogue scenes.

“It’s possible that the number of people called back will whittle down during the day,” Sabo said. “It’s a real workout for those called back for more than one role.”

Due to the competitive nature of the mu-

sical theater program, the roles are difficult to narrow down.

“We’ll call several ‘Sweeneys’ back — just to see what people do with the material,” Maze said. “We start seeing people flesh out the characters.”

Unlike the closed-door auditions, the callbacks are open to anyone who has auditioned to watch.

“I would definitely recommend watching some of it,” Purdy said. “My freshman year I was called back and I didn’t need to be there until late in the day. I watched all morning and was so excited and grateful to be witnessing such talented people doing such incredible work.”

The cast list is posted the next day.

The “difficult part” for Sabo comes with seeing many students not get in. Still, she’s adamant that it’s an important part of their education.

“It can be a great lesson in how to deal with rejection gracefully and productively,” Sabo said. “We need to learn how to do that, too.”

Whether a leading role, ensemble member or enthused fan, the completion of the audition process represents a celebration of progress.

“Sometimes the best learning experience comes from not getting exactly what you’d hoped for,” Norwood said. “No matter what the cast list says, I’m in a program that’s invested in my growth as an individual performer.”

November will see a new round of auditions for the winter and spring performances.

