

THEATER

St. Dunstan's presents 'eye-popping extravaganza'

BY SHARON DARGAY
STAFF WRITER

Chris Steinmayer will arrange stage lights.

Stage manager, Tim McGee, will make sure the sound, props and set are ready.

And the rest of the crew and cast will keep a wary on the sky.

Sound, stage and cloud check.

It's all in an evening's work for the crew of St. Dunstan's Theatre Guild as it performs its final — and outdoor — show of the season, *La Cage aux Folles*.

"Even if it's cold out here, the crew doesn't feel it," McGee said. "It's just the rains that bothers you."

The U.S. Weather Service predicts good news today, Friday and Saturday for the community theater troupe and its audience.

They can look for dry weather and temperatures that will slowly slip from the 60s into the 40s.

Ticket-holders enter the Cranbrook grounds through a gate adjacent to St. Dunstan's playhouse on Lone Pine Road, between Cranbrook and Lahser roads.

It's a short hike to the Greek Theatre, with its half-circle of back- and bottom-numbing stone seats. St. Dunstan's offers each viewer a portable stadium-style cushion to make the outdoor experience at least a little cushy.

But it can't control the temperature, humidity, insects and stray sounds. And that's what sets the annual outdoor production apart from the rest of St. Dunstan's shows.

You never know what to expect on or off stage.

"We did *Muscle Man* one year and it was so cold during rehearsals that we had coats on. And when the show opened, it was 85 degrees at night — hot, humid, sticky — and we had long sleeve dresses, leather gloves, hats," recalls Chris Pagnucco, *La Cage* assistant director. "And then this bee came."

"We had these big hats on. I literally had a bee in my bonnet," she laughed.

The crew sprays for bugs in hot, muggy weather, but can't

What: A musical comedy

Who: St. Dunstan's Theatre Guild of Cranbrook

When: 8:30 p.m., today and 9 p.m., Friday and Saturday

Where: The outdoor Greek Theatre on the grounds at Cranbrook Educational Community, Enter through St. Dunstan's Theatre at 400 Lone Pine Road, between Cranbrook and Lahser roads, in Bloomfield Hills

Admission: Tickets are \$15 for adults and \$12 for senior citizens and students. Call (248) 644-0527

eliminate the frog chorus that sometimes croaks its way through dialogue and song after hopping into the reflecting pool that separates the stage and the old bathhouse used as a dressing area and prop room.

"Cranbrook has alumni parties, usually on one of the weekends and they have a band, so every so often, our orchestra and their band are in sync, so to speak," Pagnucco noted. "You never know. You just never know what will happen. An airplane comes over and drops us out. We've had dogs running through."

And Pagnucco has seen her share of wide-eyed visitors who stray from Cranbrook House and its gardens into the Greek Theatre during Sunday rehearsals.

"They're out looking at flowers and they happen onto the Greek," she said, laughing at the thought. "They see a bunch of people on stage in drag and they must wonder, 'Where am I?'"

Transformation

St. Dunstan's transforms the stage into a St. Tropez nightclub called *La Cage aux Folles*. Anthony Marseale, a Birmingham resident, plays George, the club owner, and Jamie Richards of Birmingham is Albin, George's long-time lover and the club's star drag queen, ZaZa. A half dozen or so burly men don wigs, feathers, panty hose and dresses to play the drag chorus, known as Cagelles.

When George's son, (from his one heterosexual fling), announces his engagement to the daughter of a narrow-minded politician, George and Albin try

to "play it straight," with hilarious results.

St. Dunstan's bills the musical as an "eye-popping extravaganza," with an epic-sized cast and crew.

Cast and crew

"There are 30 people in the cast and I have 12 people back stage every night just for scene changes," McGee said. "There are four costume people back stage. You've got hand props, which is two or three people. With 30 cast members, there probably are 64 crew people."

Each Cagelle also has his or her own backstage dresser.

"It's a city. And nobody can be seen except for the cast. Once people are on stage, nobody else can move," Pagnucco said.

The crew lights a path for actors walking from the costume house to the stage, but McGee says crew members and many actors simply feel their way through the darkness when lights go out between scenes.

"You do it pretty much in black out. We've got radio head sets on, but we do it pretty much through a sense of feel."

The crew assembles nearly two hours before show time to set lights, check sound and put props and set in order behind stage.

"This theater is challenging because of the lack of electricity," Steinmayer said. "We have power from Edison, but we have just a few circuits. The nature of the theater and the distance we have to throw the light becomes a challenge."

Sound is a tad easier. The actors wear wireless micro-

phones, but Steinmayer notes that Greek theaters are known for good acoustics.

"You definitely need to project. But stand right here," he said, moving to a position in front of the orchestra pit. "And listen to

yourself. You can hear yourself whisper."

Actors learn to avoid areas of the main stage where sound deadens, playing havoc with voice projection.

"Rain is a four-letter word to

us," Pagnucco said. "One year it rained on closing night. It was so bad that they went inside and invited the audience into the theater. The cast just sang the songs."



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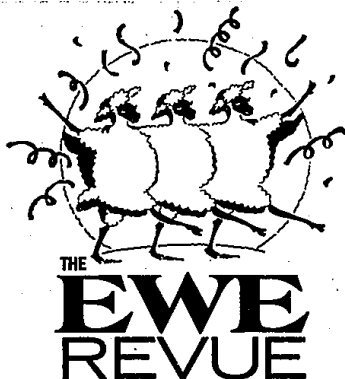
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