

Publication: The Virginian-Pilot; Date: Apr 13, 2013; Section: The Daily Break; Page: E1

WORK OF ARTS

THE GOVERNOR'S SCHOOL'S anniversary gala incorporates all of its theatrical disciplines into one grand multimedia showcase.

By Teresa Annas

The Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK

Like wrens pausing in a spring migration, teens alighted in dense clusters around the entrance to TRDance Center, where a rehearsal for a show none had seen in its entirety was about to begin.

The show, called "Zo," is the 25th anniversary gala for The Governor's School for the Arts, a magnet school for the gifted in this region. Participating teens, and there are 355 this year, go to their home schools in the morning and head to The Governor's School for afternoon classes in vocal music, instrumental music, musical theater, theater, visual arts and dance.

Nearly all of those students are involved in "Zo," which, ready or not, will be performed today at Chrysler Hall.

Just before the Monday rehearsal, three girls were sprawled in front of the dance center, relaxing in the sunshine.

"We're backstage. We're techies," said Devin Roman, a junior at Maury High School in Norfolk. She said one of the trio's contributions was crafting props.

"We made the piano," said Mabertine Pierre, a junior at I.C. Norcom in Portsmouth.

"It's like a fake piano," said Eden Guill, a sophomore at Cox High School in Virginia Beach.

"A piano to stuff someone in," Devin said, adding that they also will be helping with "the flying system."

Eden: "We're doing a flying trick that hasn't been done before."

Mabertine: "Basically, we're strapping an actor in so he can go up in the air and do a couple of flips."

Eden: "While sitting on a chair."

Minutes later, a swarm of teens entered the center and found their way to a studio large enough to hold the cast of more than 120 performers, plus an array of directors, assistants and techies.

"Today, I need each and every one of you to focus," began Todd Rosenlieb, the dance instructor and studio owner who was choreographing the dance elements for "Zo."

"For my dancers in the tango, do not stand on chairs! We don't need a sprained ankle four days before the show."

He reminded them that they were about to rehearse the entire performance but that there was a video component, too. They would hopefully see how that worked the next day.

"In your head, you've got to remember this is interactive. You've got to play it LARGE!"

Then, like a flock on the launch, all the actors, dancers and singers abruptly rose and, laughing and chattering, flew to the wings and found their places.

"Zo" is nothing like The Governor's School's 20th anniversary gala. Five years ago, the school celebrated two decades with separate showcases by each of the six departments.

Brainstorming for the 25th started nearly two years ago and soon hit on a collaborative approach led by an experimental artist and director, Natasha Tsakos.

"The star of the show is what the visual arts students have done with video and 3-D video," said Andrea Warren, executive director of The Governor's School. "It's an interaction between the (live) performer and the video performer."

The nature of “Zo” has softened boundaries between the disciplines.

“It will be very difficult for you to distinguish which kid is in the dance department or in theater or vocal music,” she said. “It’s a true collaboration of all art forms.”

The Swiss-born Tsakos lives in Miami and has performed with Cirque du Soleil; her ideas tend toward the eye-popping visual magic, dreaminess and derring-do of Cirque’s shows.

Lately she is known for pioneering ways to integrate technology with live performance. She is in the process of creating multimedia presentations for the Discovery Channel that are slated for Broadway later this spring.

She led a master class at Governor’s School two years ago that impressed the faculty. Soon after, the school hired her to conceive of an anniversary gala.

Tsakos visited the school three times last year, said Steve Earle, theater department chairman. She explored what the students were passionate about and contemplated as young artists. Late last year she sent the school a blueprint for the show – in the form of a 47-minute animated video. It was the school’s job to transform that animated concept into 3-D reality.

Separate departments began rehearsing in January. Combined rehearsals started just a few weeks ago, said Earle, director for “Zo.”

On Monday, he said that they would learn the next day whether the videos they had created would, in fact, effectively “interact” with the live performers. If it didn’t work, the school would redo the videos, he said, still grinning.

“Oh yeah, there’s not going to be any sleep this week.”

So, what is this “Zo”?

“It’s a surrealistic look at the modern spectacle of the talent show, like ‘America’s Got Talent,’” said Vic Frailing, who heads the visual arts department.

The idea, Earle said, is “how do we keep our artistic integrity in a world of media exploitation?”

Frailing added that “Zo” also is “a celebration of the creative process triumphing over how society tries to package it.”

Back at TRDance Center, the rehearsal was under way. In the performance, six people are chosen in an audition and become the heroes of the story. Each hero represents a different art form, such as dance or theater. Each has ups and downs as he or she struggles to find support and an audience.

For the students, it should seem familiar: They provided the basis for the tale.

“‘Zo’ is the story of artists,” said Grant Brewer, a 15-year-old freshman from Smithfield High School. Grant has a musical theater focus at Governor’s School.

“Not many people understand what artists go through to get even mediocre roles,” he said. “The constant rejection. I know, as an actor, I’m going to get rejected every day of the week if I go for auditions.

“But it’s all going to pay off, even if I’m up there for a second. The show really shows all that.”

He’s been in Governor’s School only since the fall.

“It’s already changed me as to who I am. I didn’t really understand what theater was until I came here. It’s opened my eyes to a whole new world.”

A world of “Zo.”

Teresa Annas, 757-446-2485, teresa.annas@pilotonline.com The goal of The Governor’s School is not exactly to create professional artists. “Our written mission is to nurture young artists,” said Andrea Warren, executive director.

“But the skills they learn they can take to any profession, such as thinking critically, being a lifelong learner and an advocate for the arts,” she said.

Nonetheless, the school can brag about the arts-world achievements of some of its grads:

Brian Simerson (1990 graduate) has been a dancer with the contemporary dance group Momix since 1994.

Barbara Quintiliani (1994) is a soprano who won the 1999 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and has since performed with top companies, including the Met.

Mary Faber (1997) performed on Broadway in "Avenue Q" and "American Idiot."

Justin Faunce (1999) is a visual artist handled by the Leo Koenig Gallery in New York City.

Jordan Brunner (2002) is an Emmy-nominated filmmaker who actively exhibits in New York City.

Ryan Speedo Green (2004) is a bass-baritone who won the 2011 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, now studies and works at the Met, and has sung with Berlin Philharmonic.

Adrienne Warren (2005) made her Broadway debut last fall in "Bring It On: The Musical."

Emmy Raver-Lampman (2007) performed in the recent revival of "Hair" on Broadway and in the first national tour.



BILL TIERNAN PHOTOS | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Ryan Davis, a student at Maury High School and The Governor's School for the Arts, spots other performers during a technical rehearsal of "Zo," which has a cast of more than 120 students.



From left, students Micah Cook, Carter Horton and Joanna Whicker rehearse for Saturday's performance.

if you go

What "Zo," The Governor's School for the Arts 25th Anniversary Gala

Where Chrysler Hall, 215 St. Paul's Blvd., Norfolk

When 8 tonight

Cost \$20 to \$40

Contact Ticketmaster at tinyurl.com/c9exko8

where it all began

The collaborative approach of "Zo," the 25th anniversary gala, anticipates the blending of The Governor's School departments in one building.

The grand opening for the newly renovated Monroe Building, at 254 Granby St., is set for January. That's when most of the departments finally will be housed under one roof, following a history of being scattered throughout Norfolk in make-do settings. Dance will continue to be at TRDance Center, and the 80-member school orchestra still will rehearse at the Virginia Arts Festival building, both just a few blocks away.

The Governor's School for the Arts started with two pilot summer programs in 1984 and 1985, recalled Deborah Thorpe, who has been with the school since then as dance department head and, since 2011, as assistant director. Its first school year began in fall 1987.

The founding director was Louise Lowenthal, an art teacher with an expansive vision for the school who has since passed away.

Over the years, the school evolved. Enrollment grew; facilities gradually improved.

"As the culture changed, so did the school. As the various art forms changed, so did the school," Thorpe said, especially regarding technology.

Lowenthal was all for experimentation. "She was very interested in being innovative and creative," Thorpe said. "That spirit completely infuses The Governor's School. Every time we turn around, we say, 'Oh, Lou would love that.'"

"She would love the whole idea of this show: Everybody collaborating together."