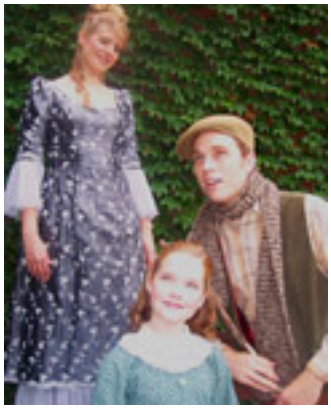
Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 08 August 2006 22:34



Derek Bertelsen, whose production of the musical *The Secret Garden* opens at St. Ambrose University's Galvin Fine Arts Center this Friday, repeats a common theatrical refrain: "It's hard being a director."

Yet it's important to understand that what Bertelsen probably means is that it's hard being a director when you're *his* age, as he follows that statement with, "You watch the Tony Awards and, you know, most of the directors winning awards are in their *40s*. So you're, like, 'I've got about 20 years. I can fool around.'"

Yes, you read that correctly. The man directing *The Secret Garden*, with its cast of 19, has to wait nearly two decades before he reaches his 40s. And, for the second year in a row, this theatre major at Millikin University has a rather adventurous idea of what constitutes "fooling around" on summer break.

"It was funny," he says, regarding his return to the Decatur, Illinois, university last August for his junior year. "A lot of the professors were, like, 'What did you *do*?' And I was, like, 'Well, I directed *Ragtime*; we had a cast of, like, 65 people ... .'" Bertelsen laughs. "And they're like, 'Oh, my *God*.'"

Last August, Bertelsen helmed a production of the epic, Tony-winning musical *Ragtime*, which was performed ("concert-style," the director says) at Galvin, and which, like this year's *Secret Garden*, served as a fundraiser for the Children's Therapy Center of the Quad Cities. And for a fledgling, 20-year-old director - for damn near

anyone -
the production was quite a success.

Ragtime , says its director, was seen by "probably about 1,400 [people]. We were able to raise over $12,000 in three days, which was really good. And people kept asking, 'What *com pany* is it with?' And I was, like, 'I don't really have a *company* ... .'"

What he did have was ambition, if not much practical experience.

Prior to his production of *Ragtime*, Bertelsen says, "I directed a staged adaptation of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* , the movie. We did it in some, like, *basement* , you know. It was totally illegal and whatever ... and that was about my only experience in directing."

Bertelsen had long been a fan of the musical *Ragtime,* but says that despite considerable interest in the show among fellow performers, he remembers being continually told, "You're gonna have a hard time doing that show," citing, among other challenges, the scope of the production and the necessity of what Bertelsen terms "minority casting."

"A *lot* of people said I wouldn't be able to do it," he says, adding, "But it was one of those things where once someone says I *can't* do something, that makes me want to do it even more."

Bertelsen secured the rights to the show personally, chose a performance weekend, and formed alliances with the Galvin Fine Arts Center and the Children's Therapy Center (which funded the cost of the production itself), after potential arrangements with the Capitol Theatre and Gilda's Club fell through.

In the end, the only thing standing in Bertelsen's way was his own lack of directorial experience. "I had had Directing 1 class at Millikin," he says, "and I had done some scene work. But going from a scene with, you know, three people to this gi-normous musical of sixty-*five* is - "

Terrifying?

"A little bit," he deadpans. "At first I was pretty nervous. But I seem to be nervous with *everything* I go into, and I think that's just how it needs to be. You know, you *want* to be on your toes."

Based on the positive responses he received following the *Ragtime* performances - not to mention the $12,000-plus raised - it appears that Bertelsen *was* on his toes. "After *Ragtime*," says the director, "one of the board members [from the Children's Therapy Center] was, like, *crying*, and she's like, 'You *have* to do this again next year!' Of course, at that time I'm just like, 'Okay, we'll get there when the time comes.' And then in January I met with the therapy center again, and they said, 'We want you to come back.'"

Hence, *The Secret Garden,* the Tony-winning musical adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's beloved children's book. Regarding the show's rehearsal process, Bertelsen is pleased to report that "it's been really good. It's not as hectic as last year. I mean, we have a cast of 19, so that is a little easier ... ."

That's right. For the 21-year-old Millikin student, a cast of 19 is *easier*. But at least he has an explanation for his directorial comfort at such an age. "Last year, I was kind of starting out," he says. "I was, you know, pretty *young* at the time."

The Secret Garden *will be performed at the Galvin Fine Arts Center at 7 p.m. on Friday, August 11; 2 and 7 p.m. on Saturday, August 12; and 2 p.m. on Sunday, August 13. Tickets are $12 for adults and $10 for students, with all proceeds benefiting the Children's Therapy Center of the Quad Cities. For tickets and more information, call (309)762-9552 extension 17.*