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January 15, 2015


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Jan. 14, 2015

Physics takes center stage in theater collaboration

By Linda B. Glaser

A collaboration between Cornell and the Kitchen Theatre Company (KTC) has found a new way to make physics irresistible, with “Physics Fair,” an original musical theater production.

The show is the brainchild of KTC artistic director Rachel Lampert, KTC associate producer Lesley Greene ’91, M.S. ’95, M.S. ’98, and Lora Hine and Erik Herman of Xraise, the outreach arm of the Cornell Laboratory for Accelerator-based Sciences and Education (CLASSE). Peter Wittich, professor of physics in the College of Arts and Sciences and longtime collaborator with Xraise, served as science content adviser for the script.



Dave Burbank

The cast of “Physics Fair” is preparing for two performances, Jan. 24 and Jan. 31, at the Kitchen Theatre Company. Standing, from left: Lora Hine, Erik Herman, Joey Steinhagen, Lesley Greene. On stools: Caitlin Mallory, Erin Hilgartner, Christian Henry, Elisheva Glaser, Imri Leshed. On floor: Kayla Markwardt, Lucian Mead-VanCort.

The idea for the play was sparked when the American Physical Society solicited creative ways to spread news and information about science, particularly physics. Hine sent the solicitation to Greene.

Greene was a natural fit: With degrees in physics, geology and atmospheric science, she had been headed for a career in science until a performance by Lampert inspired her to shift directions.

Greene and Lampert based the “Physics Fair” script on a science-related musical they’d co-written called “Science Fair.”

“In ‘Science Fair’ we didn’t have the wonderful connection with Cornell physics, so the science wasn’t as flashy and fun,” says Greene.

In the story, sixth-graders learn that “physics makes the world go ’round” when they organize the school’s first-ever physics fair. The cast features local middle and high school students; Hine and Herman make their theater debuts as physics fair judges.

“It’s part of our mission at Xraise to make science engaging and exciting for all ages,” says Herman, who along with Hine designed and built the physics demos for “Physics

Catch the performances

There are two Saturday performances, Jan. 24 and

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Fair” – the show’s “special effects.” The demonstrations cover such topics as angular momentum, simple machines, waves and the Bernoulli principle.

31, at 1 p.m. at the Kitchen Theatre Company, 417 W. State St. Ithaca. Tickets: 607-272-0570 or www.kitchentheatre.org.

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After the show, the audience will be invited on stage to ask questions of the cast (Hine and Herman will be on hand to field the harder questions).

“I am interested in kids embracing science, and theater is a great way to introduce people to all kinds of ideas,” says Greene, adding that her volunteer experience with Expanding Your Horizons [CU1] while a graduate student in geology had an impact on this interest. It also influenced the choice of a female character to push the science forward in the play.

Although the KTC run is only two performances, Xraise is committed to taking the show on the road as part of their goal of making science accessible to everyone. “This performance allows people to approach science in a nonthreatening and fun way,” says Hine. “I think the creative element to it will inspire people who might not otherwise be receptive to learning about science.”

“The play demystifies science,” says Wittich. “It’s not just a spectacle that amazes; it also shows that a real understanding of science is something that’s within reach of anybody.”

“Physics Fair” is supported by a grant from the American Physical Society; additional support is provided by CLASSE.

Linda B. Glaser is a writer for the College of Arts and Sciences.

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