

Challenge Aspen campers back on the stage with 'The Greatest Showman' this week

'Third time's the charm' after pandemic put kibosh on 2020, 2021 shows

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Kaya Williams

A celebratory number from "The Greatest Showman" had nearly three dozen people moving and grooving inside the theater of The Arts Campus at Willits on Wednesday, about halfway through a week of rehearsals for Challenge Aspen's production of the circus-based musical.

The show trumpets the value of community and inclusion as it tells the (loosely interpreted) story of entertainer P.T. Barnum and the launch of his circus enterprise.

Organizers see it as an especially fitting production for participants in Challenge Aspen's long-running Magic of Music and Dance Camp, which is part of the nonprofit's year-round recreational, educational and cultural (REC) programming for people with disabilities. The camp concludes with a public performance at noon Friday at TACAW in Basalt.

"It's a message that I think they can all relate to where it's like, 'come one, come all' and they get together for this week of camp every year," REC program manager Callie Dickson said during a rehearsal lunch break Wednesday.

"In 'The Greatest Showman,' it's honestly a lot of people with disabilities and people that don't



Nik Abowitz, front, rehearses on Tuesday, July 19, 2022, for Challenge Aspen's Friday showing of "The Greatest Showman" at The Arts Campus at Willits. Austin Colbert/The Aspen Times

have a place, and then they all come together and create this awesome show," Dickson added. "And I think a lot of these guys really resonate with it."

It's also a message that Challenge Aspen is trying to spread in its own circles and beyond them, according to REC program director Deb Sullivan, who joined Dickson and other Challenge Aspen staffers and participants under a tent for lunch on Wednesday.

"The sense of community and inclusion — those are like my themes for the week, really trying to push that," Sullivan said at lunch.

For many of the participants, it wasn't their first time rehearsing "The Greatest Showman." And that's not just because the camp was already halfway done.

Challenge Aspen also planned

to produce the musical last year at TACAW around the same time; the crew made it to Wednesday before a positive COVID-19 case put the kibosh on the production in 2021. And the year before, the virus nixed the music and dance camp before it even began; organizers had already started planning for that year's production in the spring when the pandemic hit.

This year, organizers are hoping that "the third time's the charm," Sullivan said. Sullivan said the theater can accommodate about 150 attendees for the Friday show, which is directed by Micha Shoepe and features costumes by Ashley Ryan.

The show is free and open to the public, with donations accepted at the door; free popcorn and cotton candy — part of the circus premise of "The Greatest Showman" — will be available, too.

But it's hardly the first iteration of Challenge Aspen's Music and Dance Camp, according to Sullivan and Dickson.

The nonprofit based in Snowmass

Village has been offering performing arts programming since its founding in 1995, and the Music and Dance Camp is a "hallmark program" for the nonprofit, Dickson said.

This year's 19 camp participants include some first-timers and some who are going on year 25 at the camp; the cast list includes local Challenge Aspen regulars as well as some visitors.

There are also 15 volunteers on stage with the participants, according to Erin Loftus, Challenge Aspen's volunteer program manager. Unlike the winter programs that mostly involve Roaring Fork Valley locals and second homeowners on the volunteer roster, the Music and Dance Camp also draws some volunteers from all over the country, Loftus said during the lunch break Wednesday.

"This is unique in the sense that people will book out their vacation time, just for one week (of the camp)," she said.

Director Shoepe is one of the local (semi-)newcomers on the crew this

year. He was set to co-direct the show last year and is at the helm solo this year; the opportunity has been a "magical fit" that combines his background in musical theater performance and in working with people with developmental disabilities, he said while joining the Challenge Aspen crew outside on Wednesday afternoon.

Shoepe describes this week's experience as "wonderful madness." The work is "absolutely energizing and draining at the same time," both "very intense" and "so, so rewarding," he said.

Through plenty of adjustments — and subsequent readjustments — Shoepe is confident that the performers will come to the stage Friday with "all the passion and heart we have."

"It will never be perfect, but it will always be joyful," Shoepe said.