

Backstage Pass

INSIGHTS ON STAGE, SCREEN AND BEYOND

Show Does Go On, Thanks to Understudies

By KRISTEN FIORE | *Daily Sun Senior Writer*

Not one, but two understudies were plugged into a Feb. 9 performance of “Assassins” at The Studio Theatre Tierra del Sol.

One of the actors came down with the flu on Feb. 6, which then spread to three other actors, leaving the team with no choice but to cancel the show on Feb. 7.

“This was the best solution in order to promote health for our cast and crew, and our audience,” said Grace Zottig, stage manager at The Studio.

The full cast performed on Feb. 8, but the performance took a toll on two of the actors, so understudies Madeline Gilbert and James Blaisdell stepped in for the parts of Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme and Giuseppe Zangara, respectively.

“I was actually in Key West at the time when I got the call,”

said Blaisdell, who understudies for Zagara, John Wilkes Booth and Charles Guiteau in the show. “But the moment I knew they needed me for the show, I dropped what I was doing and drove home from The Keys overnight and pretty much went straight to the theater.”

Zottig then scheduled a put-in rehearsal.

“A put-in rehearsal is a chance for the understudy to walk the track of their character in time with all the other actors present



Submitted photos

“Assassins” understudies Madeline Gilbert, left, and James Blaisdell stepped into their roles for the Feb. 9 show.

once before doing the show in front of an audience,” said Gilbert, who understudies for Fromme as well as Sara Jane Moore.

Ralph Prentice Daniel, who plays Guiteau in the show, is also the dance captain, meaning that it is his responsibility to know all of the choreography and be able to teach it to everyone.

During the put-in rehearsal, he stepped out of certain numbers to watch the understudies and give notes as needed.

“This is a great process for the understudy to join the cast and become comfortable with their choreography and blocking,” Daniel said.

There were many other elements to be considered, such as costumes, a quick session with the show’s gun handler to review gun safety before handling the stage weapons in front of the audience and more, according to Zottig.

For Gilbert, the most challenging part of the process was learning to trust that she knew what she was doing.

“I had done a lot of practicing by myself at home and during our weekly understudy rehearsals,” she said. “When faced with the actual task of going into the show, I worried if there was more I could’ve done even though I knew I had done all that I could to prepare beforehand. It was challenging to put my fears away, trust and tell the story.”

But the cast made Gilbert feel at ease.

“From the minute I stepped into the building, I felt supported by each and every person in the

theater,” Gilbert said. “My cast mates were constantly checking in and making sure I was in the right spots.”

Since “Assassins” is a Stephen Sondheim musical, the music was also a challenge.

“Sondheim is famous (and infamous) for his difficult overlapping, sometimes arrhythmic, ensemble pieces,” Blaisdell said. “Having to know three roles in songs that overlap and change was a challenge in itself, but I never realized how difficult it would be to untangle only one of those roles out of the group for myself.”

But the show went smoothly, nonetheless.

“Both of our understudies did an incredible job,” Daniel said. “They were well prepared and ready to jump into action. The shows were fantastic and ran smoothly. You would never know this was their first time stepping into the role.”

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Spanish Springs:
970 Del Mar Drive

Lake Sumter Landing: 1070 Canal St.

Brownwood: 2726 Brownwood Blvd.

Savannah Center:
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