

# The Mystery of Student Produced Theater

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“Okay, well the goal this semester is to not have to mop up any real blood,” said PVCC student playwright and director Tori Freimuth to members of her cast, as she leaned over a table filling vials with fake blood, “At least the fake blood smells nicer.”

It was Thursday, March 31, and members of PVCC’s Drama Club’s latest production were preparing both backstage and on stage for their first showing of *The Mystery of Muhammad Ranch*, Freimuth’s modern rendition on the cult classic *The Mystery of Irma Vep*. Sporadic backlights would brighten the backstage, usually followed by sound effects as members of the cast and crew hurried around with a sense of urgency, occasionally gathering around the spectacle of their castmates’ interviews before going off to practice their lines and cues.

The play was written by Freimuth last semester, an experience that Freimuth said involved both alcohol and copious amounts of stress. Once she had put the final touches on it, she then introduced the script to the president of the drama club, Zach Zartler, who was excited to introduce an original play to the group.

From there the play evolved into an almost entirely student run affair, with Zartler and Freimuth working together as directors. “The toughest challenge of this play has been that it’s separated from the rest of the shows that have been happening here,” said Zartler.

The only professional help with the show was with the lighting and occasional input from Associate Professor of Theatre Arts Brad Stoller, who serves as the drama club’s staff adviser and primary director.

“Other than that, all the things have been student done, which is remarkable, but also the hardest part,” said Zartler.

Due to the nature of having an unpracticed set of directors, things fell behind schedule. According to Zartler, most theater productions typically have their first run through at least one week before opening night; however, the cast of *The Mystery of Muhammad Ranch* was doing their first full rehearsal the night before opening night.

“This is one of these learning experiences

where newbies are giving it their best go-about. Four days ago the set was put up, two days ago everyone was wearing costumes, and now we’re doing music and lights with all of that together. These people are being true improvisers because they’re taking that and running with it, and it’s amazing how little fear they have,” said Zartler.

“I think what’s remarkable about this show is that we are getting to the point where we need to be, behind schedule, and every person here kicked into high gear, but it’s been crazy,” said Zartler.

As Zartler finished speaking, lightning light effects flashed across the stage, followed by the rumble of thunder from the speakers behind the set pieces, signaling an actor to move to their set marking to help progress the plot.

The basic plot of the play revolves around events around Muhammad Ranch, the home of Jessie, an alien hunter obsessed with discovering the body of an alien princess that may have been lost in the Bermuda Triangle.

The newlywed Jessie is still recovering from two familial deaths, that of her son, who was seemingly killed by her husband’s pet wolf, and her husband soon after.

While Jessie is out hunting the wolf that has seemingly killed her son, Jordan (Jessie’s new husband) is assaulted by a werewolf. The hunt for this werewolf and for the killer wolf leads Jessie on a journey that involves secret admirers and rivals, an alien princess encased in stone, two country bumpkins that may or may not be suffering from lycanthropy, and a confusingly dead-but-not dead husband.

After going late into the night running through the script, some new line additions, the professional lights effects (courtesy of Josh Reid, the assistant technical director that is a part of the theater departments staff), and the plans for opening night, the cast headed home for some much needed sleep and self-preparation for opening night.

In spite of the many challenges facing these student thespians, the opening night was an overall success, with many from the PVCC community in attendance.

“As far as opening nights go, for an inexperienced cast of students who are just having fun and putting on a play for themselves, it went really well,” said Zartler.