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Ruthless! the Musical Comedy+ opens at Scottsdale Desert Stages Theatre

By Doris Nehrbass | February 28, 2017

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Ruthless! the Musical Comedy+ is onstage in Scottsdale March 3-April 9. Danie Grief (left) plays Judy Denmark, and Olivia Feldman plays her daughter, Tina. Photo courtesy of Scottsdale Desert Stages Theatre.

Talented and beautiful 8-year-old Tina Denmark is positive she was born to play Pippi Longstocking in her school play, and she's ready to do anything to land the part. Just where does this extraordinary talent and unstoppable ambition come from, and where will it lead?

Find out when "Ruthless! the Musical Comedy" comes to Scottsdale Desert Stages Theatre March 3-April 9.

"Ruthless" employs multiple identities and bizarre plot twists to spoof Broadway musicals and iconic films alike and takes audiences on a roller-coaster ride filled with stage mothers,

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child actors, fame and uncontrollable ambition – not to mention murder and mayhem – all treated humorously.

Jere Van Patten, who teaches theater at Mountain View High School in Mesa, directs this Actor’s Café production. Van Patten frequently works with East Valley Children’s Theatre and is one of the directors for the Magic of Musical Theater Workshops at Mesa Community College every summer.

“What I love about ‘Ruthless,’” he says, “is how it pokes fun at the musical theater genre itself and never takes itself too seriously. It’s campy and fun, lighthearted and funny. It’s also heinously inappropriate, too!”

He adds that he and the cast spent a lot of time during rehearsals laughing together.

Two young actors share the role of Tina in the Desert Stages production. Petra Danek plays Tina on Fridays, and Olivia Feldman plays Tina on Saturdays and Sundays.

“Olivia and Petra are two of the funniest kids,” says Van Patten, “and are little professionals.”

Petra, who began acting at Desert Stages three years ago in “Alice in Wonderland,” has performed in 12 Desert Stages shows, including her current appearance in Disney’s “The Little Mermaid,” which is also at Desert Stages through Sunday, April 2. She looks forward to making “Ruthless” her lucky number 13. The 9-year-old began attending the International School of Arizona in Scottsdale at age 2.

Also currently appearing in “The Little Mermaid,” Olivia was last seen on DST’s Actor’s Café stage in “A Miracle on 34th Street.” The third grade student at Pardes Jewish Day School in Scottsdale is 9 years old and loves to sing and dance.

“Ruthless” is Van Patten’s first time working with a mixed cast of adults and kids in the same show. Though he loves working with kids and call it his “jam,” he loves this experience, too: “So. Much. Fun!”

One caveat: The production includes “colorful” language, mostly coming from Tina.

Van Patten doesn’t find the language offensive because of the context in which it all happens. “It’s so over-the-top and ridiculous and funny that these things are coming out of an 8-year-old girl’s mouth,” he says.

Before casting the part of Tina, Desert Stages let the parents know what they were in for. “All of the parents agreed that their kids have seen, heard, and probably said worse,” says Van Patten.

The target audience for “Ruthless” is ages 11 and up.

If you go: March 3-April 9; 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays. Scottsdale Desert Stages Theatre, 4720 N. Scottsdale Road. \$28; \$22 seniors and students. 480-483-1664 or desertstages.org.

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Tags: Danie Grief, Desert Stages Theatre, East Valley Children’s Theatre, Jere Van Patten, Magic of Musical Theater, Mesa Community College, Mountain View High School, Olivia Feldman, Petra Danek, Ruthless musical, Scottsdale Fashion Square, youth theater

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Doris Nehrbass

Doris Nehrbass, of Peoria, is a freelance writer, editor and proofreader.

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