

It's Back to the '60s with 'Catch Me If You Can'



Skyler Adams (center) is Frank Abagnale Jr. in "Catch Me If You Can." Photo courtesy of Christopher Clark

By BOB CURTRIGHT
Eagle correspondent

For Music Theatre Wichita's Wayne Bryan, the Wichita premiere this week of "Catch Me If You Can – The Musical" represents a nostalgic trip to the 1960s that he grew up in.

"I like the show enormously," says Bryan, the group's producing artistic director who is personally directing this 2011 Tony Award nominee for best musical.

"It's not quite the music of movie musicals, nor the music of stage musicals. It's the sound of the TV variety shows of the period, like Perry Como or Dinah Shore or Mitch Miller," Bryan says. "It pays homage to that period, although the show makes the music its own."

The musical is by songwriters Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman -- the team behind "Hairspray," another movie-to-stage-musical treat -- with a book by Terrence McNally, based on the real-life tale of Frank Abagnale Jr., who passed himself off as a Pan Am pilot, a lawyer and a doctor while cashing bogus checks worth more than \$2 million. And he did it all by the age of 21.

Steven Spielberg turned the story into a 2002 movie with Leonardo DiCaprio as Frank Jr. and Tom Hanks as Carl Hanratty, the FBI man who becomes obsessed with catching this charming young scofflaw. And the Shaiman/Wittman/McNally team set it to music that ranges from jazzy swing that Frank and the Rat Pack would be comfortable with to the 1960s pop, funk and soul of The Beatles and Aretha Franklin.

Starring in Wichita's version, which opens Wednesday, is Skyler Adams as Frank Jr. and Thom Sesma as Hanratty. David Hess and Paula Leggett Chase play Frank's loving but dysfunctional parents, Frank Sr. and Paula. Carolyn Anne Miller is Brenda, a dedicated young nurse who causes Frank Jr. to consider turning over a new leaf, and Tim and Karen Robu plays Brenda's seemingly-picture-perfect parents, Roger and Carol.

Music director Thomas W. Douglas will lead a 16-piece orchestra through what he calls “a cross-section of musical styles that has a lot of variety but is cohesive in paying tribute to the 1960s.” And guest choreographer Linda Goodrich from Michigan, who has done many dance-heavy shows for MTWichita, such as “Singin’ in the Rain,” “Mary Poppins” and “Sweet Charity,” has drawn from period dances like the Frug, Twist and Jerk plus Latin beats popular on TV variety shows to design movements that “don’t interrupt but carry the story along.”

“Frank Jr. isn’t really a bad guy. He’s constantly putting on a show for others. His father told him that it’s all about appearances. He’s charming and constantly conning,” says Adams, an Oklahoma native who was in MTWichita’s resident company for two years and returned for guest roles in “Legally Blonde” and “Monty Python’s Spamalot,” notably as Not-Dead Fred and hopelessly romantic Prince Herbert.

“Frank Jr. is also an incredibly bright kid. He could have done a lot of these things legitimately. But with his boy’s view of the world, there was a certain aspect of ‘I’m good at this. I’m enjoying this,’” Adams says. “He’s sort of like Robin Hood. He steals, but he thinks it’s for a good reason – to fix his broken family.”

For Sesma as the frustrated FBI agent always one step behind the conman, their relationship evolves from cop and criminal into something more personal.

“He doesn’t just want to catch Frank Jr., he wants to save him,” says Sesma, a Broadway veteran best remembered here as the King in “The King and I” last summer. “Hanratty is a loner who works in a world of absolutes, of right and wrong. When other kids grew up playing cops and robbers, he only wanted to play cops. He is totally obsessed with work, even coming to the office on Christmas Day because he has nowhere else to go.”

Sesma says that while he doesn’t see Hanratty becoming a father figure to Frank Jr., he does think that they come to share a bond. Both are obsessed. And both are estranged from family. In a curiously grudging way, Sesma says, Hanratty begins to admire Frank Jr.’s ability to elude him.

Broadway veteran Hess -- recent revival of “Sweeney Todd,” Frank Butler opposite Reba McEntire in “Annie Get Your Gun” – is making his MTWichita debut as the young conman’s conman father.

“Frank Sr. has a certain bravado,” Hess says, “He wants to be successful to make his wife and son proud, but he’s a conman who doesn’t have the smarts that his son has. He has street smarts, so he tries to fake his way through life.”

In a strange way, says Hess, also a TV veteran with recent appearances in “The Americans,” “The Good Wife” and “Elementary,” Frank Sr. is perversely proud of his son.

“He’s like any father whose son comes into the family business,” Hess says.

Adds Chase, who plays Frank Sr.’s fed-up divorced wife and Frank Jr.’s regretful mother: “Neither parent ever told him ‘no.’”

“She’s proud that Frank Jr. is so smart, but she is not surprised to learn what he’s been up to. She is only shocked at the (million-dollar) amount,” says Chase, a Broadway veteran who was part of the final cast of the original run of “A Chorus Line” as well as “Bye Bye Birdie,” “Curtains,” “Kiss Me, Kate” and “The Pajama Game” revival with Harry Connick Jr.

“When she says that he’s ‘a chip off the old block,’ she doesn’t mean it in a good way,” Chase says. A frequent MTWichita guest star, she was last here in “9 to 5” two summers ago.

Miller, playing the nurse who catches Frank Jr.’s eye, is a senior at Chicago College of Performing Arts now in her second summer as part of MTWichita’s resident company.

“Brenda is smart and hard-working. She’s a little timid, but not as nerdy as Amy Adams played her in the movie. She’s serious about her career,” says Miller, best remembered last year as the tragic Eponine in “Les Miserables” and the snooty Veronica of “Betty Blue Eyes.”

“She connects with Frank Jr. on some level. He helps her find her confidence, but she’s not ready to play his game,” Miller says. “While she may not stop him, she at least slows him down.”

If You Go

“Catch Me If You Can”

What: Wichita premiere of 2011 musical by Terrence McNally, Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman about a charming and ambitious con man, based on the Leonardo DiCaprio movie; fourth show for Music Theatre Wichita’s 43rd summer season

Where: Century II Concert Hall

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday-Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday

Tickets: \$62-\$26 evenings, \$54-\$24 matinees; call 316-265-3107.

Info: www.mtwichita.org