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ADULT SWIM Kiwi Callahan, center, makes her entrance,

Everybody into the pool

Pegasus checks if Sondheim can hold water.

By Kay Daly

A wet suit isn't typical rehearsal-wear. But when a cast member of Pegasus Players' upcoming production of *The Frogs* arrives clad in something like scuba gear, her castmates aren't so much surprised as envious.

Dip a toe in the swimming pool at Truman College's sports complex and you'll understand why. The pool, where *The Frogs* will be performed, isn't freezing, but it isn't warm, either.

But despite the threat of prune fingers and swimmer's ear, not one of the 21 cast members is complaining. In fact, everyone involved with the production agrees that the chance to appear in this newly revised version of a seldom-staged musical—set entirely in a swimming pool—is enough to make rehearsing in trunks and racerbacks seem downright enticing.

Based on Aristophanes' comedy of the same name, *The Frogs* began its life in the water. In 1974, director-librettist Burt Shevelove staged his adaptation in the Yale swimming pool. His cast included the university swim team as well as some before-they-were-famous theater luminaries (Meryl Streep,

Sigourney Weaver, Christopher Durang). For music, he recruited Stephen Sondheim, fresh off his successes with *Company* and *Follies*.

Since then, *The Frogs* has been infrequently produced, enjoying instead a sort of cult status among die-hard Sondheim fanatics. It's that specialist appeal that makes the piece so attractive to Pegasus Players, a company that prides itself on staging Sondheim's lesser-known works. This production of *The Frogs* is Pegasus' second (and the company's 15th Sondheim production overall), but for those who remember the group's 1988 staging, this new version is anything but a retreat.

"For our 25th anniversary in 2004, we'd planned to restage some of our signature productions, including *The Frogs*," explains Pegasus artistic director Alex Levy. "But after announcing our production, we got in conversation with Sondheim and Nathan Lane about the new revamp of the script they were planning." The company got the sense that if it held off until after the premiere of the new version at Lincoln Center in 2004, it would have first crack at the script outside of New York.

It's that new script, expanded by Lane and with added songs by Sondheim, that will premiere in its

production. But the troupe also will add a few things. For starters, there's the watery setting (the Lincoln Center production was staged all on land). Plus, it's got an enhanced score. "Sondheim was still tinkering with the music at the start of the rehearsal period," Levy says. "This production will include things that have never been heard before."

"We put all the actors in a pool for auditions."

Even though this is Pegasus' second dive into the *Frogs* pool, water-bound staging still holds unusual challenges. First, there's the echo-chamber quality of the pool area. "We learned some good things from viewing the video of the 1988 production, one of which was that a canopy is a good way to cut down the echoes," director Jay Paul Skelton says.

The set offers another challenge. To bring the play as close to the audience as possible, Skelton is using a disk-shaped playing space in the pool's center, and will offer patrons the option of dangling their feet in the water at the pool's edge. Carpenters clad in wet suits will build the set with marine-grade plywood, stainless-steel screws and foam.

The cast is as waterproof as the set. "We started with a round of auditions that were solely about singing," Skelton says. "Once we had the voices that were appropriate for this production, we put all the actors in a pool for another round of auditions." Actors were asked to swim the length of the pool while singing any song of their choice. "Then we got together and asked, 'Who retained their size and vocal energy while swimming?'"

Even for the actors who made the cut, *The Frogs* is an Olympic-size challenge. At a recent rehearsal, members of the chorus took their first stab at bringing together the production's intricate lyrics, complex rhythms, atonal chord sequences and froglike choreography. The water just adds yet another level of difficulty.

"You can't hear when you go underwater," cast member Matt Holzfeind says, "so when you pop up, you're like, 'Oh, that's where we are.'" But even with the challenges—and the bone-chilling cold—none of them regrets the chance to take this plunge.

As Skelton says: "You'll never grow if you don't tackle things that scare you most, and how could anyone resist doing a two-act musical in a swimming pool?"

The Frogs is in previews. See Resident companies.

PHOTO: MICHAEL BROGELSON