



Lights, Camera, Grease Lightning: WBHS brings back musical theater

Olivia Naber
Head-Editor-in-Chief

When you start seeing guys with glossy hair clad in leather jackets and girls in bright poodle skirts waltzing through the halls of WBHS in sing-song, don't be alarmed. You haven't accidentally found yourself on the other end of some freak time-traveling occurrence. Rather, you've found the school in a state of excitement for the first musical to be put on at WBHS in nearly a decade.

Grease is the word, and Grease is coming to the Performing Arts Center on October 28 and 29, 2023.

Choir Director Chris Reed is teaming up with Mary Denmead to bring the popular musical to life. With an extensive background in theatrical productions, Denmead will provide valuable insight and expertise to the musical.

"Since we moved to Iowa, this has been our dream, to make sure West Branch had a musical again," said Denmead, who is also the mother of 2022 WBHS graduate Samuel Torkelson and current WBHS junior Nina Torkelson.

After directing and co-directing 15 musicals for WBHS, Reed's role as musical director came to a standstill after the 2014 production of *Tarzan*. The 2012, 2013, and 2014 productions were taken on solely by Reed, who experienced feelings of burnout from the huge undertaking of planning and executing a musical.

When the PAC became available for use, Reed saw the opportunity to use the new space as a sign to bring it back.

"When you have a new auditorium and you have a designated orchestra pit, I thought we should probably be using this space for one of the reasons it's built. So I knew coming in when the auditorium was done that would be something we should definitely do again," said Reed.

However, the new facilities are only part of the reason that Reed and Denmead wished to bring the musical back. Personal connections to the musical have prompted the return as well. Both Reed and Denmead are parents of students who will be seniors in the coming 2023-2024 school year, Maddie Reed and Nina Torkelson.

"I wanted Maddie to have an experience of a musical before she graduated, thus the class, and I think Mary wanted the same thing. She would like Nina to have that musical experience," said Reed. "So, we were just talking over the last couple years, and then kind of came up with this idea of replacing choir for the first quarter with the musical."

Typically, concert choir is offered as a class for the first and fourth quarters, while show choir takes up the second and third. Instead, a musical theater class will replace the first quarter of concert choir, providing students with the chance to practice during the school day. Reed and Denmead hope that the practice times during school will help to avoid conflicts with other extracurricular activities happening outside of the school day.

While practices for the entire ensemble will take place during school, those who wish to try out for a larger acting part will need to come into practices outside of the school day in addition to the in-school rehearsals. Students are not required to audition for a larger part, though. Anyone who signs up for the new musical theater class can be a part of it, whether they have experience in the performing arts or just want to try something new.

Reed has found the WBHS administration to be very supportive of the musical theater endeavor thus far. In getting the musical approved, he spoke with principal Sara Oswald and activities director Jake Stenberg.

The biggest concerns were about rehearsals interfering with existing activities and what dates the actual performances would be. The idea to use the school day for rehearsals resolved the first and Stenberg helped to find a plausible date amongst the chaos of other activities.

"Those were the two big things: how can we make it work without making our students crazy and is there a time to actually produce the show itself," explained Reed. "Once they saw that, they were in favor of it."

If all goes as planned, Reed hopes to keep the musical as a part of WBHS performing arts culture annually or bi-annually. In the end, the continuation of musical theater at WBHS depends on both the success of *Grease* and administrative decisions.

"If it goes as smoothly as we have it in our heads, then I think we would like to do it yearly," said Reed. "That would be an administrative decision because they would have to approve that. Then that would be a thing where if they said, 'Hey, a lot of schools do bi-annually, so we're going to do that.' Obviously, I would go with whatever the decision is."

Apart from having Denmead on board, Reed foresees the need for many other people to help make the show a reality. Filling the orchestra pit will be the musical theater orchestra, led by Band Director Samuel Ogilvie and made up of both interested students and adult helpers to fill in where needed. After all, what's a musical without music?

Reed and Denmead will need a student stage manager to help the show run smoothly from backstage, as well as a crew of lighting and sound technicians to help add flair to the show. Reed is unsure of whether those working lighting and sound will be students or adults, seeing as the systems have been problematic lately.

"We're gonna need someone to run lighting, and we'll need someone to run sound. Those could be students, but because we're having issues with both of them right now, I think we'd feel a little more confident with adults at least overseeing those roles," said Reed. "It's much better if you have an adult in that role. You can be mad at them all you want, and they can take it, so we're open to the idea of students assisting with running those kinds of things, but we definitely want an adult

there. That way if something goes wrong, the adult can take the blame instead of the student saying, 'Oh, my gosh, I ruined the whole show.'"

Julianne Jenson, who used to be in charge of show choir costumes, will be returning to help with costumes for *Grease*, and Reed will be pulling in adult volunteers to build the set.

With so many elements to coordinate, *Grease* will certainly be a big production. While the budget for the production is still uncertain, Reed projects for it to take somewhere between 5-7 thousand dollars.

Reed explained, "I don't want to be ridiculous, and I haven't done one in a long time, so I would love it to be well under 6-7 thousand dollars. If we could pull it off between 5-6 thousand dollars, I would be really happy."

Having the dates and times selected, the budget thought of, and the administration on board, the only thing left for Reed was to get students on board and excited.

Despite Reed's worries about how the choir students would react to having a musical, he found that students seemed enthusiastic about the prospects of doing a musical at West Branch.

"It's been very positive," said Reed of student reactions. "I always get nervous when I announce something new because I'm like, 'Oh, my gosh, are they gonna like it? Is this gonna be bad, am I gonna have a musical theater class of two?' although all the show choir people have to be in it. Or, they're going to do it, but they'll be miserable the whole time, and then I'll be miserable the whole time."

Reed revealed the show to students by plastering several sheets of paper with different musicals written on them to the wall. Each day during class, one musical was torn off the wall until only *Grease* remained. Surprisingly, Reed found this to be the most nerve-wracking piece of the puzzle.

"I was more concerned with the show just because the whole reveal thing makes me nervous," said Reed. "What happens if you get down to the end, and they want the other show that's up there?"

So, why *Grease*?

As they searched for the musical that would be the best fit for the students of WBHS, Reed and Denmead had a few key criteria in their thoughts to help make their decision. All in all, the decision was based on recognizability, gender balance, cast size, and the fun factor.

"My biggest box to check was it had to be something that had name recognition," explained Reed. "There are wonderful musicals out there, but not everyone knows what they are. You could say *Les Mis* for short, *Les Miserables* in French, and immediately people are like, 'I don't know that,' but it's a fabulous show in English," he said.

"For our first time back for the musical," continued Reed. "I thought, 'One, you can't do a small cast because there's less revenue coming in, and musicals are expensive to produce, so you

have to fill the place. You need to pick something big and that also aligns with how we want everyone to participate in it. We need to have something students will want to be a part of, parents will want to come to, and so that's where we're like, 'Let's look through and go through all the shows that have big casts, everyone knows what it is, and are super fun that kids can relate to. Something that would be exciting.'"

While Reed and Denmead considered a variety of shows, *Grease* was the show that seemed to fit everything they were looking for.

"The main reason we chose this show," said Denmead to the choir class after the big reveal, "is that in show choir, one or two of you get to do a couple solos. They pop out or are featured in a dance number or in a solo. The cool thing about doing this show in particular is that there are at very least 10 very shiny people that pop out. There are lots of characters, lots of songs, lots of solos."

With plenty of solo opportunities, Denmead and Reed hope that students will take a leap of faith and step out of their comfort zones.

"Just be yourself and just try it," implored Reed. "Go outside your comfort zone, and meet some new people, and have a new experience. That's what high school is about."

"I want you guys to trust yourself and say 'I'm going to try that. I'm going to do that,'" said Denmead.

To help students build the confidence needed to audition in the fall, Denmead will host an audition workshop during the summer. During the workshop, students will work on music from the show as well as prepare themselves for the audition process. Denmead encourages the students to bring a song outside of the musical that fits the character or who shows off who they are as an actor.

It is not long until *Grease* is brought to WBHS, and Reed hopes that it will bring the school's fine arts students closer than ever.

"I feel like musical theater is the best culmination of all the arts," said Reed, "in that you have music, you have dance, you have acting, and you have the visual art with the set."

This is what Reed loves most about musical theater: its uncanny ability to merge all the different aspects of fine arts. It allows people with a variety of interests and skills to come together to create something out of their combined love of the arts.

"You can have people from all kinds of backgrounds come together to produce an artistic thing," beamed Reed, "and I just think that's cool." Make sure to look out for more information from Reed and Denmead as time draws closer and closer to the revival of WBHS musical theater; there are plenty of opportunities for students and community members to get involved with helping bring the "automatic, systematic, and hydromatic" power of *Grease* to life.

Here is the schedule for the 2023 Marching season, please consider supporting your local marchers!

- July 14** - Optional DCI Field Trip
- July 31, August 1 and 2** - Drumline Camp (7:30am-9am)
- August 3** - Leadership (9am-11am), Freshman Orientation (12pm-3pm)
- August 4** - Hoover Days Practice (9am-12pm, 1pm-3pm)
- August 5** - Hoover Days Parade
- August 13** - Band Potluck/Meeting Night @ 6pm
- August 15-18** - BAND CAMP!
- September 1** - Football Game #1
- September 15** - Football Game #2
- September 27** - Homecoming Parade
- September 29** - Football Game #3 (Homecoming)
- October 9** - Corridor Marching Classic (Date could shift, but this is the current plan.)
- October 12** - Football Game #4
- November 4** - UNI Band Day

Marching band gears up for upcoming season

Ashlynn Nash
Co-Photo-Editor-in-Chief

The 2023 marching band show will be themed as "Avengers" (Marvel). Many students requested a superhero theme, so Samuel Ogilvie, HS band instructor, made it happen.

"I like to utilize student input as that is the music that will keep them most engaged. This show is also refreshingly different from our last few shows, which adds variety in our experiences," said Ogilvie.

Marchers will begin learning their music for the show during May. They can then prepare for marching camp, which is August 15-18. That week before school starts is spent working hard everyday to learn the show with a specific focus on their marching skills. After camp, there is only a few weeks before football starts.

"We had a fairly successful season last year. I am excited to see if we can top that," said incoming junior Nora Ziehr.

The marching band does not plan to attend any competitions, but instead focus their approaching season on the Friday night atmosphere. The marching band works to enhance Friday nights and to encourage the sense of community.

Ogilvie said, "I want our band to bring energy and enthusiasm to the Little Rose Bowl and be the sound of Friday Night Lights."

The season does not pertain to just Friday's performances. Ogilvie's schedule consists of various marching events.

"I also try to look for other fun opportunities, such as our DCI Field Trip, UNI Band Day, and the Corridor Marching Classic. These activities allow us to enjoy the marching season beyond just competing," said Ogilvie.

Marching band takes many people to be successful. Ogilvie is the instructor, but there are several caring leaders who help support the program. Students who want to go the extra mile and provide extra efforts are able to apply for a leadership position. First, a student submits a letter in which they make it clear why they are interested in the position, and why they feel they are qualified. After that, they need to have their peers vouch for them as being an effective leader. The last step is being evaluated by a group of interviewers. Ogilvie carefully reflects on the list of applicants and makes his decision from here.

"I find it very difficult to select leadership. The band's needs are ever-evolv-

ing, and we always get many qualified applicants," Ogilvie said. "I also have to take into consideration that just because someone is a capable musician does not always mean that they are fit to lead musicians. I have to try to select a team that will build a healthy culture and move the band towards the goals of our vision," Ogilvie continued.

- 2023 Leaders**
- Drum Majors** - Nina Torkelson and Maddie Reed
 - Band Manager** - Sophie Oaks
 - Flute Section Leader** - Kaylee Kettler
 - Clarinet Section Leaders** - Nora Ziehr and Jordan Waters
 - Alto/Horn Section Leader** - Maddie Tygrett
 - Trumpet Section Leader** - Elliot Hinkhouse
 - Tenors/Basses Section Leader** - Josh Kroemer
 - Drumline Section Leader** - Olivia Naber

"I am incredibly proud of the work our band did last season to improve our band culture and our band performances. I am looking forward to building our marching skills this season and am excited to see how this new leadership can build a foundation for next school year," Ogilvie said.

Jazz Ensemble 4 guest DJs on KCCK-FM

Olivia Naber
Head Editor-in-Chief

On April 5, four student representatives from the WB Jazz Ensemble (senior saxophonist Lynzi Dykstra, sophomore auxiliary percussionist Luca Hahn, junior trombonist Nina Torkelson, and senior saxophonist Bailey Walker) were featured as guest DJs on KCCK-FM as a part of the Corridor Jazz Project. KCCK-FM is a radio station owned by Kirkwood Community College and is Iowa's only jazz radio station.

This is the second year that the West Branch Jazz Ensemble has participated in the Corridor Jazz Project and presented guest DJs for KCCK-FM. Last year, Torkelson

Songs selected by the student musicians included "Caravan" by Duke Ellington (chosen by Walker), "What a Little Moonlight Can Do" by Billie Holiday (chosen by Hahn), "Mox Nix" by Art Farmer (chosen by Torkelson), "Backatown" by Trombone Shorty (Chosen by Dykstra), "Funky Cha-Cha" by Arturo Sandoval (chosen by Walker), "Beale

St. Blues" by Jack Teagarden (chosen by Torkelson), "Blue Moon" by Betty Roché (chosen by Hahn), "Gretel" by Snarky Puppy & Metropole Orkest (chosen by Hahn), and "You Got to Be You" (Instrumental) by Cory Wong (chosen by Torkelson).

At the end of the WB Jazz Hour, KCCK aired the recording of "Running of the Bulls," featuring Bill Bergen that the jazz ensemble previously recorded at the Opus Concert Café for the Corridor Jazz Project.

Along with playing jazzy tunes, the four students covered a wide range of topics with host Dennis Green. They chatted about the increase in jazz band interest that split the jazz band into two ensembles this year, events that happened throughout the season, the upcoming musical (see story at top of this page), plans for after graduation, reptiles, the jazz ensemble's experience with the Corridor Jazz Project, and clinician Bill Bergren.

Those who wish to listen to the West Branch Jazz Hour can find it on <https://www.kcck.org/corridor-jazz-project/west-branch-guest-djs-2023/>

CJU45 readies for show choir season

Emily Coleman
Staff Writer

Christopher Jive and the Uptown 45 is ready to get back into action for the 2024 season, and a new theme is right around the corner. This time, Director Chris Reed has decided to reveal the theme for the show in a fun and suspenseful way.

Starting on May 1, there were 11 show ideas up on the white board, and everyday until May 12, he took one down until there were only two left. May 12 was the day right before the first show choir camp with Ben Schrank, and the show was revealed then to keep the thoughts stirring: Pirates!

Also, Reed played the show music for the participants that day to

really get the energy high for the camp the following morning.

Why Pirates? Reed explained, "I had the Pirates idea because I thought visually it would be fantastic. I wanted a show that was high energy, fun, and entertaining. When choosing the closer with Ben, I wanted everyone to be drenched by the time the show was over. Picking the music was really hard because there isn't much music about pirates that isn't too Disney, so some songs just had to be in the same realm of pirates. I'm super excited. I think this show is going to be amazing."

The group is hoping they can continue their Class 2A Champion streak, superior 1 ratings, and make finals at every competition in the upcoming year.

It's your future. Let's protect it.



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