

Bubble Boy wrapped in musical satire

BY ANNA BOROWIECKI
Staff Writer

Back in 1976, television audiences were introduced to *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* starring John Travolta. The award-winning, made-for-television movie was based on the true story of a teenager born with a genetic immune deficiency forcing him to live in a sterilized plastic bubble.

Fast forward to 2001 when Cinco Paul and Ken Daurio wrote a loopy, cartoony satire titled *Bubble Boy*. Despite Disney's backing, it tanked. Not giving up, the two composers Paul (book, music, lyrics) and Daurio (book), adapted the screenplay into *Bubble Boy*, a light, likeable, and lively musical with contemporary pop music and a fantasy ending.

In its first live stage play since the March 2020 COVID lockdown, Bellerose Composite High School's theatre and technical production students are showcasing *Bubble Boy*. Three public performances are slated for April 20, 21, and 23 in the school's centre court atrium.

"It deals with segregating oneself from other people and we all do it. We build barriers with others and *Bubble Boy* is all about breaking barriers. With COVID we all did it, and this play seemed very appropriate," said artistic director Judy Smallwood.

In the comedy-musical, Jimmy Livingston lives in his bedroom, a fully enclosed sterilized plastic dome. His only understanding and knowledge of the world is channeled through his mother, a racist, ultra-conservative Christian woman. Jimmy's hen-pecked father remains mute for most of the play.

Mrs. Livingstone's twisted view of the world is upended when Chloe, an attractive teenager, moves in next door. Although she likes hot boys, she gradual-

ly becomes attracted to the naïve gentle Jimmy. As the attraction grows, it arouses Jimmy's libido and wins his heart.

Since it's virtually impossible to start a physical relationship with someone wrapped in plastic, Chloe accepts the proposal of bad boy Mark, whose main objective is to seduce her. As the duo runs off to Niagara Falls for the wedding, Jimmy designs a portable version of his bubble dome and heads across the country to stop her.

But the road trip is filled with a series of colourful characters that include a Latino motorcycle gang, a Hindu ice cream seller, and a group of Moonie-styled cultists. Tracking everyone in hot pursuit are Jimmy's parents.

There are about 40 students working on *Bubble Boy*: 18 theatre technicians and backstage crew, 10 orchestral musicians, and 12 actors.

Matthew Baba stickhandles the lead role of Jimmy.

"He's an exciting singer and a trained actor. He's also a professionally trained dancer. Because half the play he's in plastic, I needed someone who is aware of his body and can move safely. He has such a sweet voice and plays the innocent so well," Smallwood said.

Jimmy's love interest, Chloe, is played by Sydney Leblanc, an aspiring actress who exemplifies the girl next door, while Rebekah Konrad is Mrs. Livingston, the musical's baddie.

"Hands down, Rebekah is forceful. She is in Grade 12 and makes things happen. She's a force to be reckoned with. You have to have confidence to play a villain, and she is not likeable throughout the play."

As Mr. Johnson, Smallwood describes Sam Willness as a master of faces.

"Sam has so little to say throughout the play and he has to play every movement with his body and face, and that's



SUPPLIED/Photo
Matthew Baba and Sydney Leblanc star in *Bubble Boy*, a romantic musical about a young man who falls in love with a girl while living in a sterilized plastic bubble. *Bubble Boy* plays at Bellerose Composite High School on April 20, 21, and 23.

why I chose him."

Benjamin Gieselmann tackles the role of the good-looking Mark, the school's most popular guy who fronts a band.

"Mark is a slimy character. He tries to seduce Chloe and the only way he can get her is to propose. In a twist, Sean, Mark's best friend, is in love with him and Mark doesn't know it. Ben is the nicest of guys. When you're a good actor, you can play someone far away from your personality and I knew he could handle it and dig deep."

The production's actors, who Smallwood describes as mature, socially aware individuals, read the script and collaboratively asked to make changes in how the element of racism was presented.

"The kids decided what they were comfortable with. They didn't want to change Cinco's writing, but he was in agreement," said Smallwood. "He Zoomed in and met the kids. He was amazing. He's quite a forward thinker and down to earth. He really wanted to know the kids. We asked about changes,

and he immediately wrote back with changes. It's such a fine line nowadays. You don't want to offend anyone. We tried to keep the meat of the story without using words that are triggers."

As the countdown gets closer to opening night, Smallwood hopes the musical will spur conversations about acceptance.

"Jimmy's being raised in a controlled environment, but he believes everyone has a place. He's always the one who shows kindness. He could be bitter or take on the persona of his mother. But he still has a child-like wonder, and everyone is taken by it. He makes us look at the world with new eyes. Whoever he comes across, he deals with things in a fair and loving way. He gives us hope, and that's what we need right now."

Bubble Boy's public performances on April 20, 21, and 23 start at 7:30 p.m. Bellerose High is at 49 Giroux Road. General seating tickets are \$15. For reservations, call 780-460-8490.

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