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Prom improv promises mindless fun on Playhouse's small stage

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Arriving for their "Awesome '80s Prom" are, from left, Noah Diaz, Bill Grennan, Cathy Hirsch, Brandon Rohe and Kaitlyn Bain.

It starts with a limo and motorcycle dropping off cast members and ends with a post-show karaoke party featuring 1980s tunes. "Awesome '80s Prom" is not your typical Omaha Community Playhouse experience.

The show, which opens Friday, will be mindless fun, director Carl Beck promises.

"I did one like this years ago, 'Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding,' in which the audience becomes part of the show," Beck said.

In fact, theater patrons are invited to dress up for prom, bring a date, dance, buy a drink at the bar midshow, even wander the lobbies and bathrooms, where you might find cast members in character to interact with.

"Awesome '80s Prom" is peopled with archetypal characters based on 1980s teen movies like "Heathers," "Sixteen Candles," "The Breakfast Club" and "Pretty in Pink." Class nerds, jocks, cheerleaders, exchange students and more will roam the halls.

The playhouse's smaller Howard Drew Theatre will be decorated for prom. At tables of 10, cast members and audience can intermingle during the show, as scenes alternate between improvised fun and scripted hilarity.

"Every audience member will see a different show, depending on who they interact with," Beck said.

For those who'd rather not be part of the show they're attending, Beck said, traditional seating will line the walls so you can just sit back and observe the fun, getting only as involved as you want to be. All audience members will be invited to vote for prom king and queen.

Since many of Beck's cast members were born in the 1980s, they've been getting tutorials on all things '80s so they can talk the talk: What tunes, TV shows and movies were popular, which names were in the news back then.

Not only have rehearsals been different, but so were auditions.

"They were all improv," Beck said. "We wanted to find out who could think on their feet, who's clever, who's extroverted, who can handle the material."

Nervous cast members are even practicing worst-case scenarios of improv interactions, he said.

"But I'm saying relax. It's going to be loose fun. Audience members may not know quite what to make of it at the start, but they'll get into the spirit of the thing."

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