UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

April 5, 2018
Shelly Leachman

Shake On It

Imagine being able to sap the personality traits from all whose hands you shake, and assume them for yourself. Would you become the person you always wished you could be? Would you ultimately learn to appreciate the “you” you were before?

Such is the situation of shy Amanda Steinberg, who even describes herself as “boring as a piece of bread”— an opinion shared by her fellow high school students. That is, until a charismatic gambler bestows her with the power to steal her peers’ personalities for herself with a simple shake of the hand. Soon, drab Amanda is an overconfident extrovert, cracking jokes and taking names.

Where is this going?

Ask the creative team behind “Shake On It,” the musical that was conceived, written, composed, produced and performed by students in UC Santa Barbara's College of Creative Studies (CCS). Amanda’s curious tale comprises the latest iteration of CCS TV Musical, a course that gives undergraduates the reins to develop and executive a musical — start to finish — over two academic quarters.

It all culminates in three live, public shows, then a closed, multicamera taping to be edited for broadcast on UCTV following a red-carpet premier at Isla Vista Theater.

“The CCS TV Musical is a longstanding tradition on campus that engages students in the act of creating at a very deep and personal level,” said Kathy Foltz, interim dean of CCS and an associate professor of molecular, cellular and developmental biology. “It is one of those wonderful experiences that a university student can look back on

and say, ‘I did that!’ It’s one thing to read about how to create a musical from square one, but it is quite another to actually do it, from conceiving the story, composing the music, and then actually pulling it all together in high-caliber performances. It is truly a labor of love, and a gift to the entire campus and community.”

The musical was created by students, but CCS TV Musical the class is the brainchild of Jeremy Haladyna, a faculty member in music composition. Seeking a way to give students experience in writing for the stage, he first launched the course in 2004.

“From the very beginning there really has been a steady, high-quality effort on the part of the students,” said Haladyna, also a lecturer in UCSB’s music department and director of the campus’s Ensemble for Contemporary Music. “This is an enterprise that involves three faculty members over two quarters, and students get 12 units if they see it through. It’s a big deal, so we expect a lot and they deliver a lot.”

Haladyna has also run the course in 2006, 2010, 2012 and 2015, in addition to the current academic year. Starting in the fall, he squires the students through writing the show — both the book and the music — from treatment to plot skeleton to songs. Every student works on every aspect, first by submitting storyline ideas. They vote as a group on which to pursue, then collaborate to develop characters, dialogue and song lyrics.

Production and rehearsal consume winter quarter, when 10 more weeks are devoted to bring the show to life on stage with the help of Gerry Hansen, a theater and dance faculty member who has been directing CCS TV Musical since 2010.

“The students involved are all very creative, dedicated and eager to learn,” Hansen said. “Although theater is an unfamiliar environment for them, they all are very open to the experience and challenges, and willing to work hard to make sure the project is a success.”

That includes writing and literature major Andrés Worstell, who said it’s been a whirlwind in the best sense of the word. He and fellow CCS freshmen Ryan Harriman and Hannah Morley wrote the show’s script. Their first year of college and they’ve already penned an original musical.

“We just got to UCSB and out of the gate we’re doing something like this, which is just crazy,” said Worstell. “I hadn’t personally written a musical before — none of us had. It’s such a unique experience and such a great opportunity, and it’s just been wonderful to do it.”

They have done it all. Besides writing the show, Worstell is lighting it, Harriman is serving as stage manager and Morley is performing, playing Amanda’s best friend, Carly. It’s a creative mashup, CCS to the core.

“These are precious years, and this is the time to learn and try things out,” said Haladyna. “Don’t do the 1,000th performance of 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat' when you can do your own thing and see how it plays. They laughed, they didn’t laugh, they liked that song, I heard people crying. Assessing how their work plays in public — that is invaluable. This is the time to experiment, and if you’ve got a place like CCS that will foster that, you’re nuts not to exploit it.”

The edited, filmed version “Shake On It”will premier in July at Isla Vista Theater, and start streaming on UCTV by September.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.