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Mature musical of frog fairy tale debuts at the Wells

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'Frog kiss,' a grown-up version of the princess and her would-be prince, debuts at the Wells Theatre with dreams of hopping to Broadway. [Read more](#) about the show.



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Left to right, Diane Phelan; Preston Truman Boyd; Curtis Holbrook, lead actor playing The Frog; Katie; Lee Hill; and Joseph Anthony Byrd perform a song and dance number during a rehearsal of "Frog Kiss" at Wells Theatre. Photo taken at a Virginia Stage Company rehearsal of "Frog Kiss" at Wells Theatre Jan. 9, 2013. (Thomas Slusser | For The Virginian-Pilot)

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Mature musical of frog fairy tale debuts at the Wells

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By [Teresa Annas](#)
The Virginian-Pilot
© January 18, 2013

Good luck spying a tense moment backstage with a fitful diva or a raving director on the set of the Virginia Stage Company's "Frog Kiss," a new and possibly Broadway-bound musical opening tonight at the Wells Theatre in Norfolk.

You could spend hours watching rehearsals, and all you would see are respectful cooperation and mutual admiration.

All of the dramatic tension would seem to be onstage, in the story - about a meditating frog who falls for a science-minded princess who believes he just might be a prince under a spell.

Arts projects - especially theater ones - tend to lure participants who resonate with the material. And one of the messages of "Frog Kiss," a philosophical and grown-up version of a familiar fairy tale, is unconditional love.

The composer, Eric Schorr, sat last week in the Wells, laptop open to a tune he had just tweaked in his computer. He scanned the composition to make sure it felt right, but kept glancing at the stage, where the cast was working through an explosive tap number.

"Kenny gives them lots of love," Schorr said, referring to the director, Kenneth Roberson, "and they give it right back."

"Frog Kiss," a decade in the making, is getting its first full production in Norfolk. Charles Leipart, a New Yorker like most in the cast and artistic team, wrote the book and lyrics.

The project is a co-production of the nonprofit Virginia Stage Company and commercial producers Susanne Adamski and Tamara Tunie. That's the same Tunie who portrays a medical examiner on "Law & Order: SVU" and played a flight attendant in the recent film "Flight."

The cast and artistic team are rich with Broadway and film credits. Curtis Holbrook, who plays The Frog, was in Broadway's 2009 "West Side Story" and the 2007 movie version of the musical "Hairspray."

His princess, Stephanie Rothenberg, made her Broadway debut last year in "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," in a starring role.

Director Roberson was choreographer for the Tony Award-winning musical "Avenue Q." Most of the designers, from lighting to costumes, have been nominated for Tonys.

"I can't believe the caliber of talent here," Holbrook said during a break.

Holbrook is the show's veteran cast member. He's played The Frog since it was presented in a spare production as part of the 2010 New York Musical Theatre Festival. It garnered numerous positive reviews. Some critics proclaimed it was ready for Broadway, and one dubbed Holbrook "a great comedic actor."

It's ridiculously hard to get a show to Broadway. So many elements have to be in place, especially backers willing to risk millions.

The "Frog Kiss" family believes it can go the distance. "The thing that amazes me with this show," Holbrook said, "is that people keep connecting to it and jumping onboard. And everybody involved loves it so much.

"I think that is going to get us really far."

"Frog Kiss" began with an agent handing Schorr and Leipart a copy of Stephen Mitchell's novella "The Frog Prince, A Fairy Tale for Consenting Adults" just over a decade ago, suggesting it could be adapted as a musical.

The two were fascinated by the 1999 book's blend of Taoist philosophy with fairy tale romance, but there was much to invent and retool.

The basic story was retained. But the book features just four characters plus a narrator, and they ended up with a 14-member cast to put across "18 to 20" songs, backed by a live band in the pit, Schorr said.

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To theatricalize the narrator in a fun, musical theater way, they gave birth to the Tao Masters - a quartet of philosophers who sing in swinging, four-part harmony, something like the a cappella group Manhattan Transfer.

Schorr and Leipart bonded as creators in the early 1990s because each favors the more tuneful era of classic musical theater, the period of such works as "Oklahoma!" and "My Fair Lady." Schorr said he has no signature style. He writes music to suit the character and the situation.

In "Frog Kiss," the music ranges from 1940s-style swing to a more recent hip-hop/R&B sound, with lots of traditional theatrical songs in between. A ballad here, a comic song there.

In the 2010 reviews, Leipart was noted for his witty lyrics, which occasionally dip into double entendre - implying sex, but never stating it graphically or coarsely. "It's a wink to the risqué," Roberson said.

Tunie suggested it's fine for ages 8 and over.

In the creators' hands, the frog is "really a creature of faith and feeling," Leipart said. The princess wants to make him into the prince of her dreams. "Ultimately, that never works."

Audiences may come to "Frog Kiss" "and have a wonderful time and laugh. There's lots of good, sexy fun in it, but you can take home a lot more. It's about faith in all forms, and the power to overcome life's very real problems and obstacles."

One thicket the show must move through is the brambly path to Broadway. If the show makes it there, the stage company will become known for launching another musical - and could eventually collect a little cash via royalties. "The Secret Garden," which premiered in 1989 with the company, made it to the Great White Way in 1991. Also, two years ago a new musical with a Bruce Hornsby score premiered at the Wells but is still finding its way toward a New York playhouse.

Tunie hopped on with "Frog Kiss" early on, by singing one of its songs for a demo with Schorr at the piano in his Greenwich Village apartment.

"I've believed from the beginning," Tunie said, "that this show is incredibly artistic and has the potential to be incredibly commercial. It is a rare combination.

"That is our dream, to get it to Broadway. But our focus right now is Virginia - and making it the best we can."

IF YOU GO

What "Frog Kiss," a world-premiere musical with book and lyrics by Charles Leipart and music by Eric Schorr

Where Wells Theatre, 108 E. Tazewell St., Norfolk

When Opens at 8 tonight; more shows 4 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, 7 p.m. Tuesdays and 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays, through Feb. 3

Cost \$38-\$55

Contact 627-1234; www.vastage.com

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