

The Washington Post

Ken Ludwig world premiere to be at high school: A Broadway master is trying out his play - Shakespeare meets “Jersey Shore” - at a Fairfax high school

By Peter Marks
November 12, 2011

The new plays of Broadway-proven writers find many paths to success. But not until Ken Ludwig pulled up to Sideburn Road had anyone thought one such path might be the stage of a public high school in Fairfax.

Yet here was Ludwig, author of Broadway musicals like “Crazy for You” and farces such as “Moon Over Buffalo” and “Lend Me a Tenor,” sitting with a script in the James Robinson Secondary School auditorium, listening and watching as a brigade of teenage thespians rehearsed the world premiere of his latest comedy, “Midsummer/Jersey.”



“Pace is everything, but pace doesn’t mean rushing,” the Washington-based dramatist implored, as the young actors, forming a crescent at the lip of the stage during a break, listened intently. “You ought to feel free to take your time. And, oh — your lines were perfect!”

You may be wondering why on earth a guy who’s had his punch lines christened on Broadway by the likes of Carol Burnett (“Moon”) and Alec Baldwin (an adaptation of “Twentieth Century”)

and Kristen Bell (“The Adventures of Tom Sawyer”) would entrust one of his beloved, untested brainchildren to the care of an ensemble rushing in after soccer practice or preoccupied by the SAT. Well, it so happens that he’d written “Midsummer/Jersey” — making its debut at Robinson Thursday — for these very students to perform. Appealing to the cultural tastes and theatrical ambitions of the “Gossip Girl” generation was exactly what this unusual if not unprecedented experiment was all about.

For in concert with Robinson’s Theatre Arts chair and longtime drama teacher, Douglas Rome, Ludwig was embarked on one of the oldest of American theater customs — the tryout of an original play — in the unlikelyst of venues. His intention, though, was to see if “Midsummer/Jersey” had adolescent legs: in other words, whether it contained the kind of juicy parts and comic firepower that would make it popular on the high school circuit, where Samuel French, the august company that licenses Ludwig’s plays, hopes to market it. Though high schools make up 40 percent of the firm’s clients, few of the professionally produced plays in its catalogues were envisioned for high school presentation.

*Above, Ludwig goes over his notes and suggestions with the actors during a break in rehearsals.
Michael S. Williamson / The Washington Post*

Certainly, the financial stakes are not nearly on the level of Broadway or London's West End, where a revival of Ludwig's "Crazy for You" is currently being mounted. A high school offering fetches only a few hundred dollars in licensing fees per performance. (Those fees were waived in this case.) Still, a popular new play staged multiple times across the country does create a revenue stream for a writer. And perhaps more importantly, an enthusiastic new coterie of drama clubbers might become lifelong fans of a playwright's output.

"I have to say, there's incredible value to introducing a whole generation to your work," said Ken Dingedine, director of operations and publications of Samuel French, which had played matchmaker between Ludwig and Rome's highly regarded drama program. "And it really fits with a writer like Ken. He lives in a world of writing that fits very well with this market."



The pressure, in a sense, was on. Rome's students would be taking on the duties professional actors normally have to, when a playwright is hearing his dialogue for the first time, and then insisting on cutting some lines, adding others. It meant a lot more homework than if the school were doing, say, just another "Our Town" or "The Crucible."

"This is a whole new experience for my kids," said director Rome, who's been rehearsing the piece — a re-setting of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" on the Jersey Shore, with a few testosterone-and-blinged-out nods to "Jersey Shore" — six days a week. And now the real tryout is about to begin, as the auditorium doors open for a three-day debut engagement of the play.

Though few of the students had seen Ludwig's plays — his work has been produced by local troupes as various as Signature Theatre, Arena Stage, Ford's Theatre and Shakespeare Theatre Company — they were aware of the uniqueness of the opportunity. Some speculated excitedly on whether their names might even appear in the published script, since the identities of original cast members are often noted there.

"I have a responsibility because this is the first time it's being done," said Ethan Malamud, 17, a junior playing the role of one of "Midsummer's" farcical lovers, a macho character named Lyle, with an accent right off the beach at Belmar or Long Branch. "It's like getting your clothes tailor-made for you."

Ludwig and Rome, a Massachusetts native trained in theater at Catholic University and a drama teacher at Robinson for 31 years, had never met when the project was being hatched late last year. "I got a call out of the clear blue sky from Samuel French," Rome recalled. "They said, 'We've got a playwright who wants to try out a new play and we can't tell you yet who it is.'"

The notion was to develop a piece of size and tone that would conform to the needs of high school theatricals. Practically speaking, what that meant was a play with a multitude of parts and — crucially — lots and lots of roles for girls, who tend to wildly outnumber boys trying out for parts in America's high schools. "You know, in the current theater world, there is a lot of theater coming out that is for five characters and all adults, and the work is getting edgier and edgier," Dingedine observed.

"You look at the 120 plays coming out and you say, 'Wow, what is there for this market?'" he added. "What the students want today is Broadway-caliber material — that's what they want and that's what they deserve. Therein forged this concept of, what if we premiered in that market?"

Ludwig loved the idea, especially because he's working on a book about how to teach Shakespeare to children, but also because if a tryout school were chosen in commuting distance from his own Washington home, he'd have a local laboratory for a play much bigger than the dozen-character works he creates for professional theaters.

"My goal was to write for about 25 roles and they would be 80 to 85 percent girls' parts," the playwright explained. (The parts of the low-comedy tradesmen that normally go to men were reset in a beauty salon and written for women; at a student's request, one of those characters was turned back into a male role.) "And I said to Samuel French, 'Why don't you choose a school in my area, so I can be involved with the kids?'"

True to his commitment, Ludwig met with the students last spring for readings of early drafts of "Midsummer/Jersey," and not only took away the sound of his words in young actors' voices, but also their suggestions for refinements. For one thing, he said, they stumbled over his use of a plot device from the original involving the fight between the fairy king and queen over a changeling boy.

"A student said, 'I didn't understand the argument — what's the argument about?'" Ludwig remembered "They didn't care about the changeling boy. I said, 'What might they be arguing over?' And one of them said, 'A muscle car!'"

On a pleasant Monday afternoon last month, Ludwig fought a Northern Virginia traffic jam and made his way to Robinson, where Rome was running the entire play for the first time. The stage crew was hammering in place the skeleton of a multi-platform set, designed by Emily Rowson, who is also playing the romantically tormented Helene, as the director ran scenes and Ludwig took notes.



"What I need is to hear you play it full out," the playwright told the actors as the rehearsal began. "Otherwise I can't tell what's working or not. Really, just go for the text!"

Most of the students had their lines down, and seemed hungry to do them justice. Though you couldn't tell from their ease with Ludwig's language, a few admitted later to butterflies. "It's amazing. I never thought I'd get to do something like this," declared 15-year-old Gabby Rojzman, who plays the volatile ball of energy Cookie, a sendup of, yes, Snooki. "It's incredible to know I'm the first person to do this part."

In the ensuing weeks, Rome would continue to run the show, and one weekend took the beauty salon scenes to a statewide high school drama festival run by the Virginia Theater Association where, he said, they were appreciatively received. Now, in the final throes of preparation, the normal hiccups were being triggered: technical issues to be worked out, student-actors to be cajoled to rehearsals.

"I may have to drop one or two of Oberon's fairies," Rome said. "I have a couple of guys whose attendance has not been as reliable as we need."

Otherwise, though, Robinson drama is raring to get the show on its feet. Dingleline is coming to the final performance Saturday. "I can't wait to see it," he said. Ludwig, who has other new plays being birthed in Cleveland and at Adventure Theatre in Glen Echo Park, will be on hand, as well. "I'm going to opening night," he said, adding, "I may go twice."

*Above, Sarah Marksteiner, left, and Carys Meyer spoof a scene from "Romeo and Juliet."
Michael S. Williamson / The Washington Post*