

GROWING & LEARNING

Arts Academy takes radio show on the road – to China



Sabrina Simmons photo

Gary Swindell is one of the ensemble's vocalists.

The 10-day tour will allow students to perform, as well as experience the sights of this ancient nation.

By Connie Brennan
For Coastal Parent

Each year, Song Yang, vice chairman of the U.S.-China Cultural and Educational Foundation, tours U.S. colleges and universities in search of talented performing arts students to perform in concert with Chinese students.

This year however will mark an exception.

After observing classes at the Savannah Arts Academy, Yang was so impressed that, for the first time in the history of the cultural exchange program, he invited a high school performance group to participate. As a result of that invitation, the cast of the Savannah Arts Academy's "The 1940's Radio Show" flew to Hong Kong in mid-June for a 10-day, six-performance tour of the ancient nation.

Conceived and written more than eight years ago by Director Sebastian Verdis, "The 1940's Road Show" is an interdisciplinary re-creation of an old-fashioned radio show. The show features not only jazz and swing music but comedic sketches as well. It is these comedic sketches

that presented a real challenge to the cast. Since many of the sketches are dependent upon quick repartee material such as Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First?", there was uncertainty about the effect of the language barrier on the audience's understanding of and response to these routines. As a result, the show has been modified to rely more heavily upon physical humor in a Vaudevillian style, which has been a welcome challenge to the actors, eager to develop their improvisational skills.

The entire cast agrees that music is a universal language transcending cultural and language barriers.

"They are going to learn that the world is smaller than they think. This is what will make them better musicians. They can relate to other people," Music Director Michael Hutchinson said.

Trumpeter Tyler Moore is excited about the possibility of performing alongside Chinese students. "We'll be bringing one of America's most traditional forms of music, jazz, to the Chinese people," he said.

Music performed during the performance by the show's 18-piece jazz band includes the standards "Tangerine," "Perdido," "String of Pearls," and "Harlem Nocturne." Various vocal ensembles croon favorite tunes of the era. Songs such as "Skylark," "Chattanooga Choo-Choo," and

"Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy," take the audience back to wartime days.

Once in China the cast and crew will travel by bus to six different cities, holding their final performance at the Great Wall in Beijing – with at least one performance coming before an audience of more than 10,000.

"I'm looking forward to the experience of a touring actor, conforming and adapting to each new venue," William Lucas said. Lucas, who plays one of the show's radio announcers and is one of the many students whose multiple talents are showcased.

Even with the Chinese government is footing the bill – with the exception of airfare – for the cast of 31 students and their chaperones, preparation for the trip has required commitment and dedication. Trombonist Justin Bartley quit his job in order to attend the many after-school rehearsals. In addition to the rehearsals, students were required to obtain passports, travel insurance, receive up to four immunizations, as well as engage in creative fund-raising efforts. While the preparations have been extensive, no one involved is complaining, in fact there is a growing excitement about being immersed in a different culture throughout the cast.

Rising junior Kat Racz is looking forward to seeing firsthand the architecture, artwork and landscape. "Asian culture and art style have always fascinated me," she said.

Trombonist Danielle Spann is looking forward to broadening her musical horizons. She and the other students are aware of their important role not only as cast members, but also as ambassadors for the United States.

"We are all concerned about unknowingly offending someone by doing or saying something that may be unacceptable to their culture," Spann said.

"The students will experience the thrill of communicating the language of art with people of another country. This just may be the performance of a lifetime for a number of our students at the Savannah Arts Academy," Verdis said.



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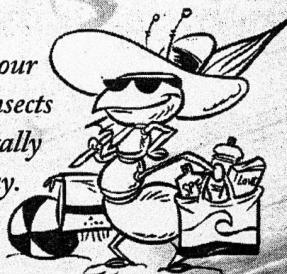
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