

On trial: 'Devour the Snow'

Students depict events which followed Donner Party tragedy

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The Battalion



CODY WAGES/THE BATTALION

Cannibalism is the driving force behind a tragic event in America's history — the story of the Donner Party. For the next week, the Texas A&M Department of Theater will portray one aspect of this historical event in their production of "Devour the Snow."

Robert Wenck, director of the production and a professor of theater arts, said the play begins after the tragic ordeal of several travelers of whom were forced to take desperate measures to ensure their survival.

Wenck said the production will depict a trial which took part after the group was rescued.

"After all of what went on, there was only one legal action," Wenck said. "It was a trial of slander in which a man who resulted to cannibalism was sued by two of the others whose children he ate. The [slander] case was for bad mouthing him and calling him a vulture."

Wenck said this story remains interesting even today.

"It still remains a quite controversial topic and it makes a good play," Wenck said, "which is why we are doing it."

Wenck said the background of this ordeal is important in understanding the production.

"The Donner Party first took off from Missouri to California as part of a wagon train to find the land of golden opportunity," Wenck said. "Along the way they made several bad decisions and found themselves trapped in what wound up to be the coldest winter on record with 30-foot-deep snow."

Wenck said to survive the group took part in a number of desperate measures.

"They ate leather, leaves and dried grass," Wenck said. "Eventually, when they began to die, they would eat each other."

James Anderson, a member of the technical crew and a senior history major, said the production will offer a number of interesting aspects such as the obscurity of a topic many rarely discuss.

Anderson said the energy within the play will most likely appeal to audience members as well.

"There is a high amount of tension," Anderson said, "and it creates a note of realism as well."

Abbie Johnson, a cast member and junior theater arts and English major, said the production features a number of interesting costumes, and the use of makeup is also notable.

"The costumes are very to-the-period, which is fascinating to see the things they actually wore," she said. "My husband in the play has frostbite on his face, so it is really interesting to see what that looks like, also."

Johnson said the characters' unnatural activities provide a unique angle for audiences to ponder.

Students portray historical figures from the legal battle that resulted from the Donner Party tragedy in the theater department's *Devour the Snow*.

"Knowing that these people ate each others families is a very emotional topic," Johnson said. "It can be very interesting as well since this is something many do not know much about."

Wenck said the production will offer opportunities for young actors to gain experience.

"The characterizations are very interesting and they give a lot of room for actor development," Wenck said. "And that is what we are all about here — actor training and theater study."

Anderson said he has learned the value of teamwork by participating in this production.

"Overall, this play has taught me how to work as a group and [that] everyone has a part to play," Anderson said. "In the end, it all comes together."

Anderson said his involvement in the play was sparked from taking THAR 135, a technical theater class, in which he helped build the set for

the play. Afterwards he was offered the opportunity to work with the production, as well.

While the work schedule was strenuous, Anderson said since he volunteered for this he has learned a lot from his experience.

"At first it was pretty difficult," Anderson said. "I had never done anything like it before. But eventually I got the hang of it and it has become a lot easier."

Johnson said her part in the production has benefited her in a number of ways.

"I play a role with a lot of emotional packaging behind it," Johnson said. "It really lets me explore more of who I am."

Although the emotional content of the play is important, Anderson said the story's historical background should not be overlooked.

"By seeing this, you can learn a lot from such a historical topic," Anderson said. "I know that by being a part of this, I did."

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