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Jean Kerr and Carson Grey Sound Ideas Interview April 10, 2018

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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Jean Kerr and Carson Grey, April 10, 2018

Laura Kennedy: Illinois Wesleyan University Theatre is turning McPherson Theatre into a roller disco for the musical *Xanadu*, directed by Jean Kerr and assistant directed by Carson Grey. The show opens tonight and like a number of popular Broadway shows right now, the musical is based on a movie. You might remember it. The original film came out in 1980 and starred Olivia Newton John and Gene Kelly, and in spite of a talented cast plus music from ELO's Jeff Lynne the film exactly didn't do boffo box office. In fact, director Jean Kerr says it was an epic bomb. But *Xanadu* didn't slink away quietly.

Jean Kerr: It later, however, received a cult following and that cult following just adored *Xanadu*, the film. Much in the same way that people adore *Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

Kennedy: You mean it's so bad it's good-

Kerr: -it's so bad it's good! And so a – a group of energetic artists in New York decided to piece together a – a schlocky musical and it is, it was a schlocky film, it's a schlocky musical and they pieced it together and – and even in the script it says, "You know in the '80s the arts are just a void of anything of value. We'll just take some terrible film and put together some terrible pop tunes and string it together and call it a musical." ... [laughs]...

Kennedy: So it's very self-aware.

Kerr: It's very self-aware, and that's the fun. That's the fun of it.

Kennedy: So we're having fun; this is not a serious re-do of *Xanadu*. It's tongue-in-cheek and having fun all the way. Carson, tell me about the music. I remember the music from the film. I like the music from the film. Jeff Lynne from ELO did the music...[music plays]... is a lot of the music still intact for the Broadway production?

Carson Grey: Yeah. I would say majority of it is and they obviously threw in a couple of more songs just to throw – because it's – I'd call it a spoof of the movie.

Kerr: Yeah – it's a sendup.

Grey: -is that a pretty fair- yeah!

Kennedy: So there's – there's fresh material if you've seen the film, you haven't seen the play.

Kerr: That is correct-

Grey: -right.

Kennedy: The people who have written about *Xanadu*, this musical is much better than the film... [everyone laughs]...

Kerr: It still is!

Kennedy: Let's talk about some of the songs that actually made it from the film to the play. I remember one that I really liked, which was "I'm Alive." Did that actually make it in?

Grey: Absolutely. It's the opening number, actually...[song plays]...

Kennedy: So we have Olivia Newton John, of course, a wonderful Australian artist and she plays a muse who inspires this painter. Tell me about your lead who's playing this muse. The name is...

Kerr: Kara Ryan – yeah!

Kennedy: Is she going with the – full-on Aussie accent or is she-

Kerr: -she sure is. Okay – Kara is a wonderful music theatre major. She's a junior and she is our Kira – she is – she is sweetness and light and she is giving and that is Kara Ryan, the actress and that is Kira, our muse. She is going full-on Aussie but Aussie only happens in the world of humans, right? So when the muses talk among themselves, they talk with a very British RP dialect – think Shakespeare on steroids...[others laugh]... yeah.

Kennedy: Why did you guys want to be involved in this, Carson?

Grey: Being in my sophomore year, as a music theatre major also, I figured it'd be a really good opportunity to really get behind the scenes and figure out how the creative process starts and really start to – I never disrespected the process in the first place, by any means, but I gained a much more valued respect, if that makes sense, in terms of how many people are involved, what it takes to really bring out the creative process and just how fun it can be when it all comes together well and it – it's just a fun comradery.

Kerr: Let me toot to Carson's horn a little bit for him. He has t- he has – he has taken on the role of assistant director but he has also taken on the role of a dramaturge for us. He has done a lot of research and done some posting. We have a closed Facebook group for the cast and a lot of information has been going up there that Carson has generated to help them understand what muses are, what the original Broadway cast was like, what's important to – the – there really is – there is a Xanadu- there is in China.

Kennedy: Xanadu de Kublai Khan, a state lit pleasure dome!

Kerr: That's right –oh, I'm impressed. Well done!

Grey: Way to go!

Kerr: Thank you Mr. Kohlridge... [all laugh]...

Kennedy: Do you really need to be familiar with the film to enjoy this musical?

Kerr: No...

Grey: I would say no.

Kerr: No – I – I think being familiar with the film deepens your joy in the musical because you understand the parody and the send-up of it all.

Kennedy: Well, of course, there is a lot of roller skating in the film. Does that translate to the film and how do you manage actors on roller skates?

Kerr: Thank you for bringing that up. When people think of *Xanadu*, they do think there's a lot of roller skating, right? And that's not exactly true. Kira, our muse, she is on skates for 80% of the show, but she is the only one. The rest of the cast gets on skates only at the end. Now there's a moment when Sonny, our male lead finds himself on skates because it's his dream to open a roller disco so he – he does demonstrate that he – he knows his way around some skates. But yeah – the big moment of the cast being in the roller disco is when it's actually realized and *Xanadu*, the roller disco opens and they all skate – skate around. So what did we do – we partnered with the local skating roller rink here in town – Skate 'n Place and Tim and Diane are the owners there and they have been wonderful for us. We took the cast, starting in late January, at least once a week to the roller rink and they mentored our entire cast to help them feel comfortable on skates. Some of our cast had been on skates – almost all of those who had been on skates were inline skates, not-

Kennedy: -Mm-hmm... not quad skates.

Kerr: [overlapping]...quad skates. So that was a bit of a transition. And I would say, Tim and his family had just embraced us and we could not be more grateful to what they've done for us. [another song plays]

Kennedy: So what does *Xanadu* teach us about creativity...and muses?

Kerr: I think it is about creativity but I think there's – there's a deeper meaning here...and what we have here – the humans in this story have lost their way. They don't know who they are anymore. So when I look at *Xanadu* and I want to know why – what's the message – what I want to say with it, it's know who you are, follow your dream and everything will work out OK. And you'll get *Xanadu*.

Grey: To me, *Xanadu* means a state of divine pleasure, a state of finally accepting the joys of life in where you're at and not taking anything for granted.

Kennedy: That's director Jean Kerr and assistant director, Carson Grey. *Xanadu* runs through Sunday at McPherson Theatre on the IWU campus in Bloomington. I'm Laura Kennedy.