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'Peanuts' characters face death, sex, alcoholism

by MATT MILLER
The Rocky Mountain Collegian

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One hour to curtain call.

Backstage, Roger Miller walks along the pitch-black path lined on one side by curtains and on the other by shelves. Mumbling a to-do list under his breath, he skillfully makes his way through the darkness to a table.

"I start to feel the anticipation, and I get into my own head and think: 'I have to do this. I have to do that,'" said Miller, who plays the lead role in the CSU theatre department's first play of the year, "Dog Sees God: Confessions of A Teenage Blockhead."

He picks up a pack of fake cigarettes that sits next to a rum bottle filled with iced tea.

Hardly the props expected to be in a play inspired by the 1960s classic comic strip "Peanuts."

The play puts Charles M. Shultz's beloved characters in high school where they are dealing with death, drugs, sex and plenty of problems bigger than missing a football.

With 50 minutes to show time Miller, who plays the Charlie Brown-influenced character named CB, is applying makeup in the mirror. His face, which now has a more pronounced structure and rosier cheeks, is calm.

"If you put the necessary work into it there's no reason to be nervous," said the junior theatre major. "I've never been so nervous I freeze up."

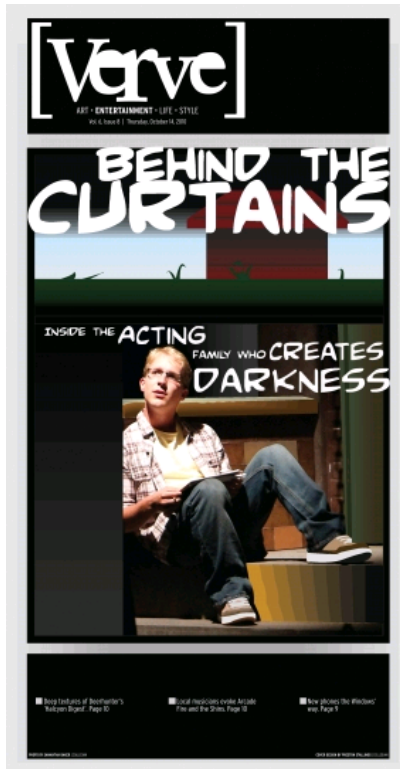
Miller has been acting since he was a freshman in high school, and nerves are not an issue.

"In 'Polaroid Stories' there was on-stage nudity," Miller said. "If I had been asked to do it, I would be nervous."

The road to the Studio Theatre has not been an easy one for Miller.

"Freshman year of high school I kept not getting into things, but I was hooked anyway," he said.

Then he experienced what he



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He walks the backstage maze in the University Center for the Arts like it's his childhood home; he greets every person he passes.

"Hey, 15 till warm-up," comes the voice of stage manager and senior performing arts major Deidre Raph.

"Thank you, 15," the cast in the dressing room yells in response. They sit around talking and joking with one another.

In 45 minutes they will be cussing and screaming at each other on stage.

Senior performing arts major Sean Cummings and junior business major Kiernan Anglely sit and discuss Oscar winners in a dressing room surrounded by lights and mirrors. Their reflections, now different under costumes and makeup, watch the friends in silence.

"A couple of my closest friends are in the cast," said Cummings, who plays Van in "God Sees Dog." "We live together, basically. I see them more than my roommates."

This attitude behind the scenes adds to the overall quality of the performances.

"It's really helped to make it feel organic," said Anglely, who plays Matt in the production.

Anglely added that he understands Cummings' sense of humor and can use that knowledge on stage.

The atmosphere and personalities of everyone backstage stand in stark contrast to the dark themes of "Dog Sees God" and the play-opener, "Snipes," a 15 minute short play Cummings wrote.

Although they are two separate entities, "Snipes" works as a prelude to "Dog Sees God," and accentuates its themes.

The plays tackle the darkness of high school and the pain, loneliness and confusion teens face.

Cummings' script was originally performed at the 2010 Regional Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival in Reno, Nev., advancing as a semifinalist in the national KCACTF Short Play Award competition.

"I was in a bad mood one day and wondered what causes kids to do the horrible things you see in the news," Cummings said of his script.

With 30 minutes to show time, the cast of eight separates from the rest of the theatre staff for warm ups.

They will stretch their bodies, minds and voices, but most importantly they will begin the transition into kids scarred by life.

"My character, who is based off Pig Pen, has gone through a huge transition in his life," Anglely said. "Somewhere along the lines, he made a complete 180."

His character, who in the comics was a bullied child, has grown into a hateful teen who bullies others. Although Anglely didn't go through the same evolution, he does identify with changing as a teen and has taken bits and pieces from those he's met.

For Miller, his lead role was easier to identify with.

"There are a lot of things that I can latch onto, like the awkwardness of high school," Miller said. "What helped a lot was reading the strips. I tried to borrow a lot of (Charlie Brown's) movements."

"I found out Shultz was a genius for body language," Miller said.

Just 10 minutes before they step in front of the audience, the cast is playing air guitar.

After loosening their bodies, they begin on their voices.

"I'm not a fig plucker, nor a fig plucker's son," they say in unison, clearly enunciating each syllable.

Each of them is smiling. Their laughter echoes through the empty warm up theater.

The warm up is the last family dinner before their character's lives unravel on stage.

Five minutes.

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