

## **Rock Ridge Performing Arts, 1 of 5 schools in the Country to Perform in a Broadway Tour House at the International Thespian Festival**

Eight years ago, Tony Cimino-Johnson (Mr. CJ) sat with his students in shock and awe as he watched Kenosha-Bradford High School's national high school premiere of "Disney's Tarzan." When the lights in the Lied Center came up and the audience returned to reality, he was breathless. This performance had a profound impact on Mr. CJ as an educator, and the spark ignited by Bradford's students and their director inspired a dream. Mr. CJ dreamed that one day his students would have the same opportunity to inspire and challenge new and veteran theatre artists alike to tell beautiful story by performing on the Lied Center stage at the International Thespian Festival.

Established in 2014, Rock Ridge Performing Arts (RRPA), under the leadership of theatre teachers Tony Cimino-Johnson and Rebekah Hess, strives to create a space where innovative and inspiring stories can have an impact on local, national, and international stages. Beginning with an auditorium still under construction in the brand new Rock Ridge High School, a plate of cookies, and seven students in an art room, Rock Ridge Performing Arts has since traveled across the globe to create, innovate, and inspire through theatre. This includes performing twice in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (the largest theatre festival in the world) and 3 times as Chapter Select at the International Thespian Festival in Lincoln, Nebraska representing the state of Virginia in front of an audience of 300.

The International Thespian Festival is a week long Festival where 4500 thespians, teachers, industry professionals, and colleges converge in the center of the country to celebrate, educate, and inspire through theatre education. Workshops, college auditions, playworks, musical works, tech challenges, scholarship auditions, individual events, and some of the best theatre in the country are offered throughout this week long conference. Each year, 11 schools from across the country are invited to perform their full length production at the Conference in one of two spaces. Six productions perform in Kimball Hall, a music performance venue that seats 700, and only 5 schools in the country receive the prestigious invitation to perform in the Lied Center, a Broadway Touring House, in front of audiences of 2200. To receive this invitation is one of the highest honors in theatre education.

Since 2015, Rock Ridge Performing Arts (RRPA) has strived to challenge curriculum norms by empowering students to design all aspects of productions including sets, costumes, props, lighting, and sound. As part of their mission and vision for the program, Mr. CJ, Miss Hess, Mr. Johnson (technical director), and Mr. Markwood (vocal director) knew that receiving an invitation to perform in the Lied Center would not only be a huge honor, but also an opportunity to teach students 21st century skills on a large scale while being seen by students, teachers, professionals and colleges from around the world. Each year, for the last four years, RRPA submitted a show for adjudication, hoping to receive such an invitation. These productions included "Ghost: The Musical," "The Addams Family" and the one act "Ernest and the Pale Moon," which became the Southeastern Theatre Conference Grand Champion, a title Mr. CJ

and his students received after competing against roughly 3,000 high schools across 13 states in the south.

This year, Mr. Jim Hoare, the Executive Vice President of Theatrical Rights Worldwide, granted permission to RRPA to premiere the School Edition of "Bright Star," a Steve Martin and Edie Brickell musical about perseverance, triumph, empathy, and compassion. Tasked with creating original designs and staging that are accessible to high schools across the country, the team of teachers and students began a journey into the 2018-2019 School Year that would provide one of the most memorable and impactful experiences in Mr. CJ's career as an educator. Receiving a "Wolf Trap Grant for High School Performing Arts" to help produce the show, "Bright Star" quickly became a fan favorite as it opened in January to small but inspired audiences. "Bright Star" went on the road to perform at Radford University, at the Virginia State Thespian Conference, where it became the 4th RRPA show screened by the Educational Theatre Association in the last 4 years and the 6th in Mr. CJ's career (none of which received an invitation to perform at ITF).

Audiences raved about the production, claiming it was one of the most impactful theatre experiences they had ever witnessed and saying "everyone needs to see this production" and "are you sure these are high school students?" Even though the reviews were positive the directing team knew that the journey was not over. Many excellent schools are adjudicated each year and receiving an invitation to perform at ITF might remain an unrealized dream.

However, on March 27th, 2019 Mr. CJ, with the help of Miss Hess, Mr. Johnson, and Mr. Markwood, shared with his students the email that they had been waiting for. Rock Ridge Performing Arts received an invitation to perform at the International Thespian Festival, and will be one of five schools in the country to perform on the Lied Center Stage the week of June 24th - 29th. Coincidentally, this will also be the last time the Festival is held in Lincoln, Nebraska and therefore, the last opportunity the students and teachers had to receive such an invitation. Next year, the Conference moves to Indianapolis.

The invitation was met with pure excitement, shock, awe, wonder, and most importantly love. Mr. CJ stated "when I first got the email, I sat down and I cried. This has been a dream of mine since attending my first conference in 2012. To be able to share this dream with these students, this staff, and this community is simply a dream come true. What this teaches us all is to never give up and never stop setting goals for yourself and your students. My next thought was, how am I going to raise all of this money?"

It is going to cost the organization roughly \$75,000 to travel their production to Lincoln, Nebraska. The entire set, professional live musicians, lights, sound, costumes, props, students, tech crew, and chaperones must all travel together, and the show must be performed as the screeners saw it performed at the Virginia State Thespian Festival in January.

As a result, Rock Ridge Performing Arts will be re-mounting the show for four (4) encore performances, thanks to the generous support of Theatrical Rights Worldwide, on May 30th, May 31st, and June 1st. All proceeds will directly benefit travel expenses. Additionally, a GoFundMe is being established, and the company will be raising funds through spirit nights, car washes, flower sales, and sponsorships. This is the first time in the history of Loudoun County, that a school will be representing LCPS, and the first time in five years, that a school will represent the state of Virginia. To learn more about the program, please visit [www.rockridgeperformingarts.org](http://www.rockridgeperformingarts.org).