

Diverse group finds common ground in song

BY MELANIE BOLTHOUSE
Summer Guide editor

As the music ends and the performers on stage hit their final move of the number, they're met not with thunderous applause but with the voice of a director telling them to hold their pose.

Frozen in the lights, the cast of 30 appears almost as colorful as the backdrops for the show. But that is to be expected from the Young Americans.

"We're very diverse," said Ivan Wimbish, a second-year cast member of the performing arts group. "We have all different religious backgrounds and we have all different upbringings. It's really cool."

The Young Americans, which will perform all summer at the Dennon Museum Center's Milliken Auditorium, has been traveling the country and the world since it was founded in 1962. The group is considered a "show choir" because members not only sing but move to the music.

The 15 men and 15 women represent a larger group of 200 students who train to tour with the Young Americans while attending the California Pacific College of the Performing Arts for college credit.

As Young Americans, however, their lives are much different than those of average college students.

Groups travel year-round

and focus mostly on outreach tours, during which cast members complement their performances with three-day workshops in schools and towns.

The tours not only impact local students but the performers themselves.

"Going on tour for three months, I think it adds four years to your life or something," said Ashley Frost, a first-year Young American and 19-year-old Lake Ann native. "You grow up really fast and mature."

Frost performed with the group in Germany on the Spring 2004 Tour alongside 20-year-old Traverse City native Phil Smith.

"You get to be in a different home every four days," Frost said. "You get to meet different families and you work with 400 kids. I think it's the best thing ever."

Both Frost and Smith auditioned for the Young Americans after seeing its local show last summer. They moved to California in September.

"I've always wanted to go to California and I thought this would be a good in," Smith said. "It's good to get away for a while, and it's good to be back."

The cast in residence in Traverse City this summer began preparing its two-hour show on June 13 — two weeks before its opening performance on July 1. Shows take place every

Thursday through Sunday at Milliken Auditorium.

"We rehearse like 20-hour days," Frost said of the practices leading up to an opening performance. "We'll work on a number, we'll stage it and then we'll clean it and we'll clean it some more until it's absolutely perfect and it's what our director wants and then we just move on. And we just do that forever. And it's never perfect, so basically we just keep doing that."

The first act of the production is a variety show covering all styles of music from gospel to pop. The second act is a tribute to Broadway.

"It features eight different musicals, just little snippets from each one," said Katiina Leard, spokeswoman for the Young Americans. "It is everything from 'Crazy For You,' which is a gorgeous tap number, to 'Les Miserable,' which is very dramatic, to last year's Tony-winning show 'Hairspray.'"

When it's not entertaining northwest Michigan audiences, the cast has plans to do what others living or vacationing in the area do in the summer: relax, go to the beach, get jobs and enjoy each others' company.

"It seems like everyone is really open to meeting new people and everyone is cool and nice and has their own personality and own spirit," Frost said. "We pretty much always get along."



Record-Eagle/Lara Neel

Sarah Sheahan as Hello Dolly and Eldridge Graves sing the overture to the Young Americans' performance at Milliken Auditorium in the Dennon Museum Center.

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