

# Westfield students perform in HCC love story

HOLYOKE — The plot of Diana Son's play "Stop Kiss," the Holyoke Community College theater department's spring 2023 production, centers around a vicious attack the audience never witnesses on stage. Nevertheless, that absent scene serves as the pivot point around which the narrative revolves.

"It's really two storylines," said director Susanna Apgar, an HCC alum, graduate of Smith College, and playwright long involved in the Pioneer Valley theater scene. "The way she wrote it is quite fascinating. It's one chronological story, but it jumps back and forth in time, scene by scene. It's the story of these two women falling in love, and it's also the story of the aftermath of the attack — a gay bashing attack — which leaves one of them in a coma."

HCC will present "Stop Kiss" April 13-15, nightly at 7:30 p.m., in the college's Leslie Phillips Theater, with a 2 p.m. matinee Saturday, April 15.

The April 14 show will be interpreted with American sign language.

Tickets are \$5 for members of the HCC community; \$8 for seniors and non-HCC students; and \$10 general admission.

They are available at the door

one hour before showtime or by calling 413-552-2528 for reservations.

"Stop Kiss" focuses on the evolving relationship between Callie, an insecure New Yorker (played by HCC student-actor Kit McKenzie of Westfield) and her new friend Sara, a self-assured Midwest transplant (Em D'Allesandro of Westfield). The kiss in the title refers to their first, which also becomes the catalyst for the attack.

"It's a great title, because it can mean so many things," said Apgar, of Easthampton. "It can mean the kiss was stopped, but it can also mean to stop denying who you are and just kiss already."

"Stop Kiss" opened in New York City in 1998 and the following year received the Media Award for best New York production from GLAAD, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

This year marks the play's 25th anniversary.

Apgar said she chose it because the themes and issues the play raises are still as relevant today as when it first premiered.

"On the one hand, I simply wanted to celebrate this beautiful love story, that journey of self-discovery that develops through a relationship with

another person," she said. "On the other hand, I picked it in response to the current political climate."

Apgar notes that a lot of queer art and media came out in the 1990s following the devastation of the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and the political indifference that surrounded it.

"Here we are now in this moment where there are bills spreading like wildfire, with politicians trying to legislate people's existence," she said. "It's just a very ugly climate right now, particularly for trans folks, but also for the whole LGBTQIA community, when you consider incidents like the Pulse and Club Q shootings. We've moved forward in a lot of really important ways, but we're also hitting reverse in some important ways."

Apgar, who lives in

Easthampton and is founder and artistic director of Strident Theater, said the actors and production crew at HCC have enjoyed learning about the history behind the script.

"I was 19 when this play debuted, and in 1998 the language around queer identities was much more limited and much more rigid. I personally couldn't find a category that I fit into," said Apgar, who identifies as queer and non-binary. "Now I'm working with students two decades younger wrangling with a text from 25 years ago, and we're finding the most wonderful insights together."

In addition to D'Allesandro and McKenzie, the cast includes HCC students Nyasia Aguirre, Nathan Alvarez, Daneion Blake, Kate Hebert and Henry Ramos.



Holyoke Community College student actors and Westfield residents Kit McKenzie, left, and Em D'Allesandro rehearse a scene from "Stop Kiss." (SUBMITTED / HCC)

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