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TheatreZone brings island vibe to the stage

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‘ESCAPE TO MARGARITAVILLE’

Musical to bring laughs, island vibe to TheatreZone

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Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA

The Jimmy Buffett musical that hit Broadway a few years ago arrives this month in Naples, full of songs about that famous cocktail, cheeseburgers and more.

“Escape to Margaritaville” arrives at TheatreZone on Feb. 9 and runs at various times through Feb. 19.

Mark Danni, TheatreZone founding artistic director, said he saw the Broadway version a few years ago and always wanted to bring it to the theater on the campus of The Community School of Naples. And just as “Mamma Mia!” was built around the lyrics of ABBA songs, “Escape to Margaritaville” delivers a story true to Buffett’s music.

“They took all these lyrics into account and got very clever with how they created this story,” Danni said. “So when people are singing these songs, it’s like it was created for this show.”

Here’s four things to know about the play:

How is tropic vibe created on stage?

Well of course, Buffett songs are known for their laid-back vibe and “Escape to Margaritaville” will feature his biggest ones like “Margaritaville,” “Cheeseburger in Paradise” and others maybe not so familiar to the audience.

Gerritt VanderMeer, who plays Tully, said he even wasn’t aware of Buffett’s “Tin Cup Chalice” and “Coast of Marseilles.”

“Tully is a singer-songwriter who is living on a tropical island somewhere in the Caribbean,” said VanderMeer, a theater professor at Florida Gulf Coast University. “He’s kind of modeled on Jimmy Buffett.”



Gerritt VanderMeer performs as Tully during a dress rehearsal. PHOTOS BY NICK SHIRGHIO

VanderMeer even learned to play the guitar for his role, focusing on the songs in the musical’s lineup.

What makes this TheatreZone version so special?

Danni invited his friend, Keith Thompson, to work as musical director.

Now based in Las Vegas, Thompson’s numerous professional credits include serving as conductor and musical director for the first national tours of “Mamma Mia!” and “Cabaret.” His more recent works includes serving as musical director and conductor for the Las Vegas companies of “Jersey

Boys” at the Palazzo, “The Producers” at Paris Las Vegas and “Hairspray” at the Luxor.

Danni is the play’s director, while his wife Karen Molnar Danni is choreographer.

And as Danni noted, even the band will be decked out in Hawaiian shirts.

“This is one of those shows here the band is visible to the audience, and that’s always great,” VanderMeer added.

What will audiences take away from the show?

Audiences when they leave the show will be “in a great mood at the end of it and gets everyone singing the songs,” Danni said, adding: “We’re prepared for them to sing during the show.”

“It’s going to be a lot of fun and that’s what it’s all about, it’s Jimmy Buffett music, it’s about having a good time,” VanderMeer said.

“Jimmy Buffett’s music and his whole mystique really appeals to the Midwesterners as well as the beach bums.”

And part of the play even takes place in Cincinnati.

What else should you know before you go?

There’s few tickets left for all “Escape to Margaritaville” performances at TheatreZone, 13275 Livingston Road, Naples. Show times are 7:30 p.m. Feb. 9-11 and 16-19; 2 p.m. Feb. 11-12 and Feb. 18-19.

Tickets are \$50-\$65 at available at theatre.zone or at the box office, 888-966-3352, ext. 1.

Dave Osborn is the regional features editor of the Naples Daily News and News-Press. Follow him on Instagram @lacrossewriter and on Twitter @NDN_dosborn.



A scene from the Feb. 6 dress rehearsal of the TheatreZone production of “Escape to Margaritaville” that runs Feb. 9-19 in Naples.