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Profile Feature

Directing People to Better Themselves

How one Rocky Horror director aims to do more than put on a show.

Amidst a cluster of corsets in a hot and bursting bar, Kelly Bergenstein is drunk from both the Long Island in her hand and immense pride for the show she's directed. Her light skin glows behind her black corset and velvet skirt, which is cut well above her fishnet knee highs and highlights a pair of platform Dr. Martens. Although her outfit is usual for the Lost Flamingo Theatre Company's *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, last October's performance was the first time in her *Rocky Horror* career that she felt comfortable wearing something so revealing.

"It was a huge turning point for me," Bergenstein says, "I feel like I could show up naked and covered in glitter now. Once that wall was climbed, there was no stopping me."

When joining the student theater organization as a freshman at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, this confidence was cinched under the corset she didn't feel she could wear. Once she became a part of the Rocky Horror crew as their assistant director, she felt an immediate sense of belonging. The support from her cast and crew gave her lifelong friends, a newfound confidence and the courage to come out as bisexual to everyone she knows.

"This show, it sees your potential, and it brings it out. It teaches you how to be yourself but amplified," she says. Now a graduating senior, and three-time lead director for the show, she notices that she isn't the only one the show has touched personally.

Those attending Rocky Horror for the first time, lovably called “virgins” by the show’s regulars, are likely to be confused by what occurs. While the original 1975 movie plays on a projection screen, revealing a 10-foot-tall, cross-dressed Tim Curry singing “I can make you a man,” a shadow cast portrays him and the other actors, mimicking their lines and mannerisms. Around the world, actors and returning audience members put on this show to purposefully make fun of the movie, potentially the raunchiest and worst one in cinematic history. OU’s version specifically does this in a fire-code-maxed bar, on a set of handmade platforms (fresh black paint covering years of sticky booze stains) and with a set of backup singers/dancers known as the “whorus” for their minimal red, black, and darker black costumes.

“In a word, [it’s] slutty,” Bergenstein says with her high pitched chortle.

“A wild, fantasy, extraterrestrial sex romp” is how Kirby Flowers, playing Eddie for his fourth and last time this year, describes the show.

While the movie’s plotline may be both ludicrous and altogether lacking, its cult following has persisted over 40 years, evolving from the “come-as-you-are” culture that surrounds it.

“I swear, I see people in their Sunday best talking to someone with nipple clamps on, and it doesn’t matter!” Bergenstein says, “No one’s holding it against anyone whether they choose to participate in the culture or not.”

It’s exactly this liberating experience that Bergenstein wanted to magnify here at OU. When taking over the show as director her sophomore year, she implemented a more strict policy against “negative energy.” Their first rehearsal after auditions is not a normal rehearsal, but a time she uses to draft a contract of sorts, addressing rules that are aimed to make everyone feel safe, supported and comfortable. She has yet to have a problem with cast members speaking

negatively to/about one another, but it is a problem she does not plan to tolerate. “These people have your back, or they’re not in the show anymore.”

Her directing style is a mix of seriousness and playfulness that resonates well with the cast. “Like she would take a bullet for any of us, but she would also shoot us directly if we missed a rehearsal,” says Tess Plona bluntly while other cast members laugh and agree. Plona, in her third year of playing Janet Weiss, refers to Bergenstein as a “mama tiger.”

Flowers goes further, saying, “I’ve never met someone who’s so forceful, but also so casual at the same time.”

Logan Amon, starting his first year with the *Rocky* crowd as Frank N. Furter says, “It’s a lighthearted environment. I think Kelly makes fun of us and says jokes more than she’s like, ‘okay look, get your shit together.’”

Bergenstein has fun with rehearsals, yelling out crude callbacks (alternate and often dirty lines said over the movie by the audience) and other random obscenities at every opportunity. But if she senses any discomfort, she also works with people’s insecurities. New members tend to be intimidated when first joining the group, especially since returning cast members keep their role until they either leave the show or graduate. But Bergenstein understands this as she faced it herself, and with the environment she reinforces, tensions dissipate within the first rehearsals. “Not many people have been in a show that operates the way that we do. Whether it’s performance style, as a shadow cast, or, you know, being on stage in front of 300 people a night in your underwear.” She makes the sexual nature of the show a liberating aspect instead of an uncomfortable one, and never makes anyone do something they’re not comfortable with. She

sees flexibility in what each actor wears and does as necessary, not a compromise, liberating them both physically and emotionally.

Lexie Pritchard, three time whorus member and choreographer, says, “I never knew that a person could validate your worth and the way that you feel as much as Kelly has proven to me that people can.” She describes rehearsals as a culture where it’s acceptable to show your weakness, and believes that Bergenstein needs that as much as they do.

When Bergenstein’s grandmother recently passed away, she went to rehearsal. It was where she wanted to be. Her favorite part of the show is seeing how much everyone has grown as individuals and bloomed confidence. Members have told her that the show helped them overcome an eating disorder, come out to their parents, and got them through the death of a friend. These types of stories remind her what this incredulous show is all about, and makes her proud to be a part of it.

“If she knows you’re a person who will benefit from this experience and being in this community, you’re in the show hands-down,” tells first time whorus member, Sarah DiFiore. “It’s really about changing people’s lives for her.”

The fifteenth annual Lost Flamingo Theatre Company’s *Rocky Horror Picture Show* will take place at

The Union Bar & Grill (18 W Union St. Athens, OH 45701) October 20-22.

Doors open at 9:00pm with the show starting at 10:00pm.