

AGAINST ALL 'ODDS'?

Kids play a big role in theatrical version of popular PBS television show 'Odd Squad'

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — Things are about to get odd at Lake Michigan College.

There will be villains. There will be music. There will be gadgets.

"Odd Squad: Live," the interactive musical stage show based on the Emmy Award-winning PBS Kids TV series, needs all would-be secret agents (and their parents) to converge on LMC's Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre — at either 11 a.m. or 2 p.m. Saturday — to help solve a seriously strange case.

It seems a trio of villains are planning on turning Odd Squad agents Orion and Oleanna into adults on their way to the theater, which fans of the show know means they will most definitely need assistance.

"As soon as we get to the stage the villains of the story turn us into adults," Jackie Reynolds, who portrays Oleanna, says by phone during a tour stop in Omaha, Neb. "If you know the show, agents above the age of 13 aren't able to use their powers. Because we are turned into adults, we can't use any of our gadgets, we can't solve any of the oddness going on so it is up to the kids in the audience to use their powers to help us out."

Like the TV series, created by Tim McKeon and Adam Peltzman, "Odd Squad: Live" follows the exploits of Odd Squad, a kid-run organization that solves peculiar problems in their town using indirect reasoning and math skills. This musical adaptation is set up to have audience members believe their own city is a training ground for new Odd Squad agents.

A video screen shows agents Orion and Oleanna (portrayed on video by young actors Kane Bailey and Kaitlyn Chalmers-Rizzato) on their way to the theater when the trio of villains — Evil Gardener (Thomas Anawalt), Lady Terrible (Tiffany Renée



ABOVE AND ON THE COVER: Cliff Sellers, front left, portrays Agent Orion and Jackie Reynolds, front right, is Agent Oleanna in "Odd Squad: Live," the stage show based on the PBS Kids TV series.

Thompson) and Father Time (Bryan Black) — turns them into adult versions of themselves. With help from Ms. O (Millie Davis, also appearing on video) back at headquarters, the agents (Cliff Sellers and Reynolds) spend the rest of the show interacting with the audience in an attempt to get changed back into kids.

"We immediately break the fourth wall as actors on stage," Reynolds says. "We immediately acknowledge the audience. We ask them questions, and they are able to talk at us, so every show is different. It has thrown a few challenges our way. We have literally had kids out of their seats trying to climb their way up on stage. You have to try to find that balance and help them know when they should listen and when they should talk, but as an actor, I have to remember my character is only 12 years old and I need their help. That has been



really cool because anything can happen and it's always different."

The series, which premiered on PBS in 2014 and is coproduced by the Fred Rogers Foundation, has been a hit, particularly among children 5 to 8, for its blend of problem-solving lessons and cheeky humor. Within the program's satirical universe, Odd Squad agents — all of them kids with surprisingly adult jobs — keep the rest of us safe by using their brains and an unlikely series of gadgets that perform unusual functions as they face off with a variety of recurring villains, who often put a mathematical spin on their own nefarious plots.

The TV show won four Daytime Emmy Awards in 2016, including Outstanding Writing in a Children's Series and Outstanding Direction in a Children's Series. Co-creators McKeon and Peltzman along with series writer Mark De Angelis, also



"Odd Squad: Live," the stage show based on the

penned the stage adaptation, so the quirky nature of the concept remains intact.

Kids also can expect to hear favorite songs from the "Odd Squad" series, including "Up, Down, Left, Right," as well as new tunes from composer Paul Buckley.

"The writers were in the room with us during rehearsals and writing right along as we learned this," Reynolds says. "I think we had 11 different versions of the script before we went on tour because they kept rewriting and rewriting as we went to get it just right."

Reynolds who studied theater at Virginia Commonwealth University, graduating in 2013, immediately headed to New York

NOT IN THIS CROWD



Photos provided / Samantha Burkart

PBS Kids TV series, comes to Lake Michigan College on Saturday.

City, where she has since appeared in what she describes as “Off-Off Broadway” productions of “Rent” and “Evita,” as well as performing as a soloist in Maury Yeston and Jonathan Larson tribute concerts. A casting director, who knew her work, called her in to audition for “Odd Squad: Live.”

Like many of her fellow 20-something castmates, Reynolds, a native of Newport News, Va., wasn’t familiar with the TV show when she was cast in the musical’s lead role and suddenly thrust into the Odd Squad world.

“I never saw ‘Odd Squad’ before we went out on tour, and now that I am in this world and part of this whole phenomenon,

it’s just been awesome seeing all these kids in the audience who love the TV show and how much they enjoy being a part of an interactive audience,” she says. “Luckily, they have an Odd Tube channel on YouTube and you can really get an idea of their world and their humor by watching those videos. So I started watching that and then as a cast we would get together after rehearsals and watched some episodes or a specific scene because there are moments in this show that are taken directly from that Odd Squad world. Kids who know all the facts pick up on that right away. So it was something I did have to cram for to get up to speed.”

Now five months into the six-month tour, Reynolds herself has become a fan of “Odd Squad,” and its message, right down to her red Converse shoes.

“I think it is just so relatable,” she says. “If you look at the TV show, the characters are from all different backgrounds. One of the main characters, who is a boy, happens to love dancing, and one of the main characters, who is a girl, loves sports. Every single kid on the show is not necessarily the ‘cool kid,’ but they are clever and funny and down to Earth, and kids have responded to that. One of my favorite things to do is, after the show, some of us get to do a meet and greet and sign autographs and

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JACKIE REYNOLDS
who portrays Oleanna

IF YOU GO

What: “Odd Squad: Live”

When: 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday

Where: Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$20-\$32

Contact: 927-1221 or themendelcenter.com

Artist info: oddsquadlive.com

Meet & greet: Stars of the stage show will hold meet and greets at 10 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. Saturday. Tickets for the meet and greet events are \$5 per child and can be purchased at <http://bit.ly/2hqtcNF>

take pictures, and we see kids of all ages, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds who all love this show. I’ve even seen parents in the suit and tie with their red Converse on. They love it because it’s funny and it’s smart. It’s a smart, smart show.”

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