

## Support Our Troupes! New Pauper Players Show Makes Theater Accessible



UNC students Valerie Coq, Colleen Cravens, and Bonnie Chen acting as ensemble in *21 Chump Street*. Miasol Yara, playing undercover cop Naomi Rodriguez, sits behind them.

**By Colin Franco**

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — UNC Pauper Players presents *Troupe*, a showing of three 10-minute mini-musicals, in the hopes of making college theater more accessible to students.

From the outside, musical theater can seem incredibly intimidating. Those generally not involved tend to see the singing and dancing as something embarrassing that only the brave and talented can do.

Freshman and *Troupe* cast member Natalie Easley portrayed these fears during her recounts of high school, saying, “I was always so anxious to sing and I would have really horrible stage fright. Even though I was interested in musicals, I kind of always got too scared to audition.”

Even experienced actors are hesitant to join in college, viewing it as a competitive environment that chews them for every minute of their schedule and spits them out over a single mistake.

Sophomore Mary Stone, *Troupe's* stage manager, recalled, "When I was in high school, my drama teacher made theater seem like that was all I could do—like I didn't have time for anything outside of that."

UNC student-run theater organizations handle things differently, though, and *Troupe* is meant to showcase that.

Pauper Players' annual production of *Troupe* condenses a full UNC musical experience into a single month, taking place entirely in January. Its short shows and brief timeline give a digestible, low-commitment opportunity to nervous actors and newcomers alike.

In the past, Stone relayed, *Troupe* was simply a performance cabaret of songs from musicals. This year, Pauper Players has shifted to a full-scale production of three mini-musicals: *A Most Average Musical*, *Book Lovers*, and Lin Manuel Miranda's *21 Chump Street*.

With the shift, the show's production schedule was updated. Junior Abby Russ, *Troupe's* music director, has been participating in theater at UNC since her first semester. She shared, "All student theater productions, including this one, meet five times a week for three and a half hours every day."

While this appears to be a strict, all-encompassing endeavor, cast members seem to disagree.

"*Troupe* is very flexible. It's a commitment, but they're surprisingly really willing to adjust the schedule based off of your plans and needs," said Easley, who is completely new to theater

Easley's claim of flexibility sounds odd; however, it is made possible by the multi-show format. As put by Isabella Antunez, another freshman cast member:

"We have blocking days where my show would only come in from 8:30 to 9:45 that night and we'd just work through our show specifically and go home after."

Unlike Easley, Antunez has been participating in theater since her third grade. Despite her comparative wealth of experience, she said, "I chose *Troupe* just because it's my first time doing

anything in Carolina's productions. I just kind of want to get a feel for it and meet people before I jump into something bigger."

As a student-run theater group, Pauper Players also holds the goal of welcoming *Troupe's* new flock of actors, like Antunez and Easley, to UNC's theater community by getting them acquainted with one another.

Russ stated, "We're really emphasizing this is meant to be a fun space; like, 'interact with each other, meet each other because these are the people you'll work with in the future.'"

This approach worked brilliantly, as Easley and Antunez both raved about how supportive the environment was.

"I feel like it's really supportive and there's no judgment at all. Even if I mess up a song, no one really cares. They're just very encouraging and I feel like that really helped with my confidence, too," shared Easley.

Russ also highlighted the relative experience of those on the production team and how it can benefit the *Troupe* cast, having commented, "This is their chance to meet people who kind of know the ins and outs of the department."

*Troupe's* shift to being a production honors Pauper's community-building objective, providing a more realistic experience to the cast. It also helps to reel in the audience, offering both a more entertaining experience and a lighter time commitment than even a regular musical would. With this, people can come and support their friends, giving encouragement for them to audition for bigger shows in the future.

Stone was very pleased with the change, saying, "I love seeing things go from start to finish, everyone becoming friends and hopefully new faces around the theater community."

With cast members being able to meet both new and old members of the community, Stone envisions the show as a "gateway" into UNC theater.

She declared, "I think it'll be a stepping stone for them to realize that they can do the bigger shows if they want."

Catch Troupe on Friday, Jan. 31 at 6 p.m. or 8 p.m. in Room 104 of the Center for Dramatic Arts for only \$5 per ticket.