

'Tarzan' swings into Morgan Theatre

By [Katie Whitmore](#)

staff writer

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From the Disney screen to the Morgan Theatre stage, Tarzan is embarking on his high-flying adventure. In its final stage production of the year, the theatre arts department is bringing the jungle to Utah.

“Even though the musical is based on the animated feature film, it is a more mature treatment of the story,” said Kenneth Risch, director of the musical and department head for the theatre arts department. “In the musical, there is less emphasis placed on ‘cuteness’ and much more on Tarzan’s growth. It strongly emphasizes the theme of how we define family.”

The Morgan Theatre has undergone a ceiling replacement, allowing the theatre department to attempt a new type of challenge by sending the actors flying. Three of the actors traveled to Las Vegas in December to practice with the company Foy Flying, who supplied the university with the rigging that will send them swinging over the audience.

The department will be using “state-of-the-art” equipment that is similar to equipment used in Broadway productions, professional theaters and opera companies around the world.

“Once off the ground, the person who is flying has little control over where he goes,” said Michael Francis, a sophomore in acting who plays the part of Tarzan. “It’s all up to the two guys who are flying him to determine how it looks. They are just as engaged in the performance, and just as artistic, as we are, and we owe a lot to their hard work.”

Although some sort of resistance might be expected from actors being suspended above a stage by two technicians, this cast did not complain.

“This is an incredibly brave and fearless bunch of actors and crew,” Risch said. “When you attempt to do a show that involves the kind of aerial work we have choreographed with people who have never ‘flown’ or done aerial silk work before, you usually run into resistance from some who are understandably concerned



Ryan Costanzo photo

The USU theatre arts department presents "Tarzan" this week. Michael Francis plays Tarzan.

about their safety and/or are afraid of heights; not so with this group. I am so proud of their willingness to try anything.”

Francis said he did not expect his role to require so much from him before he was cast.

“The role of Tarzan is far more intense than I had anticipated,” Francis said. “It's easily the most demanding part that I've ever prepared for physically, musically and emotionally. It's the theatrical equivalent of a crossfit routine.”

The theatre arts department is pulling out all of the stops for this production, Risch said. The costume designer for the musical, Spencer Potter, worked with Nancy Hamblin, who designed the costumes for the production of “Tarzan” at Tuacahn Amphitheatre and Center for the Arts near St. George. Many costumes used by the actors at USU are on loan from Tuacahn.

Sarah Boucher, a senior majoring in vocal performance, plays the part of Jane Porter in the production.

“Since Jane doesn't enter the story until later, I have loved being able to sit in the audience and watch the opening sequence,” Boucher said. “Within the first few minutes, so much happens. It is visually stunning and sets the audience up for the rest of the show. I don't want to give it a way, but there is a shipwreck, flying gorillas, a murderous leopard and lots of action.”

The cast has had plenty of time to get to know each other, with the first auditions taking place a year ago and full rehearsals starting in the beginning of January.

“The thing I love most about working with the other cast members is that we all have produced this collaborative attitude and work ethic to allow this show to be more meaningful and powerful than a fluffy disney show,” said Kyra Sorensen, a sophomore majoring in acting who plays Kala, Tarzan's adopted ape mother. “Altogether and with the overall idea that Ken Risch, the director, has implemented, we have created an inspirational and relatable story for our audience; not to mention they are all a blast to spend time with and witness everyone's talent and growth.”

The play opened Tuesday and will run every night at 7:30 through Saturday. There will be an additional matinee on Saturday at 2 p.m.

– *katie.whitmore@aggiemail.usu.edu*