

Sarah-Nicole Jackson, Contributor | Apr 17, 2024

'Kinky Boots' to close out the Clarence Brown Theatre 2023-24 season with performances scheduled through May 5



The ensemble cast of the Clarence Brown Theatre's 2024 production of "Kinky Boots" stars Omari Collins as Lola and Wes Williams as Charlie. Courtesy of Le Anna Jacobson

"Kinky Boots," the final play of the 2023-24 Clarence Brown Theatre season, opens today, Wednesday, April 17, at 7:30 p.m.

The Broadway musical is based on the 2005 British film and follows the main character Charlie, who has inherited his father's shoe factory. After meeting Lola, a cabaret performer and drag queen, they form a bond despite their drastic differences and come up with a design to shock the whole shoe industry. They hope to save the factory and the jobs of all who work there.

McKinley Merritt, Nashville native and UT alumna, is returning to the CBT stage to play the character Lauren in "Kinky Boots."

"I think 'Kinky Boots' is about accepting people for exactly who they are," Merritt said. "Whether you agree with them or not, whether you feel like you understand them or not, sometimes it's not really our job to understand. Sometimes it's just our job to hold space and listen and allow people to be themselves."

Presley Keith, a senior theater major, with a double concentration in acting and design, said she is excited to end her undergraduate years with "Kinky Boots" as her last play.

"When hearts and minds are kept open, so many can and will benefit from it!" Keith said. "The strong themes of optimism and teamwork are also very prominent through the highs and lows of trying to save dozens of jobs and a business that has been passed down for generations."

The theatre department has also brought in Rusty Mowery, a UT alumnus and the director of "Kinky Boots" since it first hit the stage. He has worked around the globe as a director and choreographer for plays such as "Pretty Woman," "Legally Blonde," "Hairspray" and "Cats."

"I am so incredibly lucky to get to be apart of such an amazing show, considering the opportunities and connections it has provided me with!" Keith said. "Working with Rusty, the original Broadway choreographer, has been such a beneficial experience."



Wes Williams and McKinley Merritt rehearse the Clarence Brown Theatre's 2024 production of "Kinky Boots." Courtesy of Le Anna Jacobson

Keith was involved with CBT even before she was an undergraduate student at UT. Her first performance was in the play "Violet," in which she played a younger version of the titular character. She intends to pursue acting in New York City post-graduation.

"Our theater department is so lucky to have such an incredible staff including so many talented mentors and esteemed professionals who have found massive success in their field showing us the ropes and molding our education!" Keith said.

Merritt shared a part of "Kinky Boots" that especially resonates with her.

"There's a line sung by a character that says, 'You change the world when you change your mind,'" Merritt said. "It's okay to say you have learned something and change your mind. I think it's such an important lesson for us to learn."

She encourages people to stay healthy, be safe and enjoy the show.

"I feel a special connection being able to work here with guest artists who are from New York and from all over the country," Merritt said. "Also, to be able to still dig my feet into what feels like a second home here in Knoxville. My time in the theater department was filled with so many kinds of theater and different kinds of shows. I'm always trying to be open to learning, and so I really appreciate being able to come back and perform on the Clarence Brown stage even though I don't go here anymore."

"Kinky Boots" will run through May 5, with tickets priced at \$5 for UT students. For specific dates and showtimes, visit the CBT website. The play is recommended for mature audiences and will run for two hours and 30 minutes with one intermission. It will also contain a theatrical haze, strobe-like effects and sudden loud noises. Take caution if these are elements that affect you.