

Bill Russell (far right) and his crew are working like slaves to turn the UNBC agora into a scene from Roman antiquity. It will soon be a forum for theatre. JOHN MCKENZE/FREE PRESS

All roads lead to UNBC Forum a colossal production worthy of its forbears

Rome was not built in a day, not in Italy and not at UNBC. It will take hundreds of man-hours to put up the superstructure and facades to transform the university into a Romanesque set fit for "a comedy tonight." A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum and a few funny things are going on in the Agora right now.

The play is a total farce, a traditional old slapstick comedy in a Vaudevillian sort of style - at least on the surface. It is life in a gilded cage for the main character, a mischievous slave named Pseudolus who does everything in his wily power to gain freedom from his wealthy Roman owners. He can't afford to buy his freedom, so he must trick and prank his way along, which isn't that hard when you live under the roof of this comically dysfunctional family.

The family's oldest son, a love-struck romantic fool, provides the answer Pseudolus needs. The youth falls for the beauty next door (which happens to be a brothel), an equally lovestruck romantic fool of a



girl. The problem is, both are forbidden from marrying each other.

Pseudolus promises to bring them together...if he gets his freedom. But that requires the help of the other next-door-neighbour, the brothel owner and the deceit of the boy's moronic parents. And the next-doorneighbour. And an entire Roman legion. And too many others to count after awhile.

This is actually classic theatre at work. These techniques used today by everyone from Woody Allen to the Farrelly Brothers, were solidified by Shakespeare, but started back, not coincidentally, in the classical theatre age: ancient Greece and Rome. Three distinct areas of the set, three distinct forces getting tangled together.

"You see it in the three houses. The action around and between the three houses is integral to the plot," says director Judy Russell. "The set design has to be so carefully done, otherwise the actual script won't work. This kind of staging is something I have never had to do before."

Bill Russell and his crew are at work on the set already, designing the three houses and the area in between so the audience can see all the action in all three important places - and look like Rome at the same time. He says "I studied the Roman trademarks of architecture. Of course there is the arch, and there were columns, although they were more for ornamental purposes than for structural integrity, as will ours be."

It has to be a very solid set full of unseen portholes and escape hatches for the actors. Judy explains that in the second act alone, "In about 18 pages of dialogue I have 130 ons and offs from all 33 cast members. I'm going berserk trying to organize this. Getting that to work within the shape of the Agora, without killing the actors and so they have enough air to deliver their lines, is the big challenge."

The set will be 80 to 100 feet wide, 30 to 40 feet deep, two stories tall, use 100 sheets of three-quarter-inch plywood, and all within the imposing stone and glass of the UNBC Agora. It is sheltered from wind, refuge from rain is three feet away, sound is contained for easier hearing, the moon rises directly behind it all, and the university buildings add to the atmosphere just like it did for their production of Jesus Christ Superstar in the mid-90s.

"Tm so glad to be back in the Agora. There is just a special feeling about this place. There is an atmosphere you don't get in a parking lot," says Bill.

No, you have to go all the way back to ancient Rome. *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum* runs July 23 - 25 and 27 - 29 (opening night toga party!). Tickets on sale now at Studio 2880.

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