

STAGE

Everyone's heard the old adage "the show must go on," but how many people have actually had to deliver on it? That's exactly what Karen Thead, along with the rest of the cast and crew of "The Fox on the Fairway," did last weekend at Starkville Community Theatre after they lost a lead actress 24 hours before the show was set to open.

The golf comedy had been in rehearsal for six weeks and was ready to debut last Thursday evening in the Playhouse on Main Street. On Tuesday, actress Heather McGinn, who plays the role of Pamela, approached show director Christopher Walrath with a problem.

Her grandfather was very sick, and, though he was undergoing a medical procedure to prolong his life, it was possible he might not survive the next few days. Her family was coming together at home in Rhode Island, and she knew she had to be with them.

"She had to make the right decision for her and her family," said actor Sean Dyess. "And she did."

It looked like McGinn would be flying home Thursday morning and returning to Starkville for the show's fourth performance on Sunday afternoon.

Though the cast and crew were supportive of McGinn's departure, it left them with the question of what to do about the three performances she'd be missing – with only 48 hours to figure it out.

Community theatre is a labor of love for all involved, staffed by volunteers in their free time, surviving largely on favors, community connections, and good will. Unlike professional companies, SCT has no understudies for its roles.

Walrath called SCT president Paula Mabry on Tuesday evening to discuss options, and Mabry's thoughts were immediate and adamant. The show couldn't cancel – it had to find a way to go on.

"I'm a big believer in that," she said. "I learned a long time ago that if you shut down a show... it's not going to get (to the point of being) ready again. You'll never be ready. So the show goes on whether it's ready or not." Walrath convinced Mabry he had a solution.

Karen Thead was the production's assistant director. She'd been with the show for all six weeks of rehearsal, though she'd missed the dress rehearsals on Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday.

On those nights, Thead, a theatre major at MUW, had to attend performances of a one-act play she staged as part of a class final.

Tuesday evening, she received a text from Walrath: "Start learning Pamela's lines."

"You might have to go on, you might not," she recalled. "We don't know yet." McGinn's travel plans finalized on Wednesday, and the rest of the cast learned about it that night, 22 hours before their scheduled opening.

"After you process (concern for Heather and her situation), you start to kind of cringe internally," said Dyess, "because someone is going to be thrown into the fire. And your mind starts racing and thinking, well, how can I help this person? Can I get them up to speed?"

The cast banded together for Thead, offering any support they could to ensure the best possible product for audiences under the unique circumstances.

The following day, while SCT representatives called ticket-holders to explain the change in the cast and while other opening night details were being finalized, Thead said she "didn't really have time to get nervous." She had a day full of college classes to attend, stealing fast glances at the show script when she could.

The cast assembled early to run Thead's scenes at least once before going in front of a paying crowd. The character carries a small notebook, and Thead taped lines of dialogue to its pages as a necessary crutch, though she says she wanted her reading from it to be unobtrusive to audience eyes.



Gabe Smith

Before the show began, Walrath encouraged Thead to use her nervous energy as a way to connect with the free-spirited character she was suddenly playing.

"Any time you run into conflict onstage," he told her, "just laugh it off. Make fun of it, and find a way to stay in that moment."

Like Dyess, he compared Thead's predicament to being thrown into a fire. "The only thing you can do is embrace the pain," he said. "Just accept it."

As she walked onstage coursing with adrenaline, Thead says she thought, "Whatever happens (now) happens. There's nothing I can do about it at this point. I'm going to do the best I possibly can."

According to Walrath, Dyess, Mabry, and other audience members in attendance that night, Thead landed her first line – a joke – like a pro and put the audience and her fellow cast members at ease for the rest of the performance.

Mabry believes that the crowd's initial laughter locked Thead more deeply into the character and boosted her confidence, and Dyess was impressed with her delivery and how much progress she'd made learning the lines in so short a time.

"She came out big and loud and ready to be heard," said Walrath. "Everybody jumped on the train from that moment."

Dyess surmised, "I think she absolutely knocked it out of the park."

Thead came through opening night a hero, but she didn't rest on her laurels. By Friday, she knew nearly all of her lines in the first act without having to check the script. By Saturday, she knew almost the whole show. By Sunday, she says, she likely would've had all the dialogue committed to memory.

She never had to prove it, though, because McGinn returned to the role as scheduled, and Thead assumed her backstage role as stage manager.

Thead, who will graduate from MUW in a few weeks, has a summer job lined up at a theatre in Oklahoma City, where she'll be doing carpentry and other set work for their season of large-scale musicals and comedies.

She says her experience stepping in for "The Fox on the Fairway" has made her a better actress. "I kind of surprised myself," she said.

Strangely, this isn't even the first time this has happened to Thead.

When she was fourteen, she said, she also had to step into a vacated role in a children's production at her home in Macon. Similarly, she'd been assisting backstage when an actress left her role, though in that case what was supposed to be a one-night change turned into a role for the whole run of the show, again with script in hand and no time to prepare.

Though statistically unlikely, if the same thing happens to Thead a third time, she's confident she'll make it through with head held high.

"The Fox on the Fairway" continues its run this weekend, with performances tonight and Saturday at 7:30 p.m. Reservation seating is available by calling 662.323.6855.

Mabry says it's a shame more people didn't see the show on its opening weekend, and that local arts events don't always get the turnouts they should.

"We have exceptionally talented people in this community," she said, "and just the idea that somebody can step in to a major role (without warning) and carry on so well is quite impressive."