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For release

Stage and Film of “Jonah and the Great Fish” to Premiere on SCERA Stage

(Orem, Utah) -- To say Chloe is intimidated would be an understatement. It is well into the school year and her family has moved to a new city. It's tough at any age to move, but especially in junior high school. As Chloe wanders the scary-looking hallways filled with strangers, she feels like an outsider. She flips through her former school's yearbook and wants to return to familiar surroundings.

Chloe longs to belong and, with her father's help, finds her solution through the biblical story in Jonah 1:17 where “The Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah.” As seen through her eyes, she envisions a story about Jonah—who wants to return to familiar surroundings rather than face the wicked city of Nineveh—and the great fish, too. She gives the fish a name—Humphrey—and pictures him as an oversized kind of creature never picked for any game during school recess. He doesn't understand why he was made such a huge size, but there is a purpose for the lovable Humphrey that will reveal itself. Why Chloe ends up at her new school will also be revealed, and she will learn that there are no misfits in God's plan.

Chloe's perspective forms the focus of “Jonah and the Great Fish,” a musical and film screenplay by Liken the Scriptures, co-produced with the SCERA Center for the Arts. It will premiere at the SCERA Feb. 5-15 and also be filmed and released for DVD distribution. Liken the Scriptures is part of Lightstone Pictures, which has produced several biblical and Book of Mormon stories.

“Jonah” is the latest in a series of stories seen through the perspective of a child. Reserved-seat tickets are \$12 for adults and \$10 for children (age 3-11), students (with ID) and seniors (age 65+) and are available from 10am-6pm weekdays and Saturdays from 12Noon-6pm at SCERA, 745 South State, Orem, by calling (801) 225-ARTS, online at www.scera.org or at the door 30 minutes prior to the performance.

Particularly excited is David Osmond, who plays the lead role of Jonah. No stranger to biblical stories—He took over for his uncle Donny in “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” and then did the national tour of the production—says he especially looks forward to singing the music by Aaron Edson.

“Musical theater is a love of mine, and when I looked at the music, I knew I wanted to do it,” he says. “My first association with Liken the Scriptures was through Aaron Edson who approached me six years ago about doing an earlier film. Unfortunately my work back then didn’t make that possible, but we have kept in touch and this time I was available.”

“I heard David Osmond sing several years ago, and his voice knocked me out,” says Dennis Agle of Lightstone Pictures, one of the owners and the production’s director and script writer. “I was equally impressed with his stage presence. His talent will really add to ‘Jonah,’” a sentiment echoed by Ken Agle, another owner and producer.

“We are playing David’s Jonah as well-intentioned but who experiences high anxiety as he realizes Ninevah is not a good place to go,” Ken says. “Think East LA, somewhere that is a little dangerous. Our Nineveh is run down with rival gangs.”

The Agles launched Lightstone several years ago after seeing a production of “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.” They decided they wanted to take other scriptural stories and place them into the imagination of a modern-day child. Among their projects have been “Daniel and the Lions,” “Esther and the King,” and “David and Goliath.”

“We want them to be fun but have a theme that will help young audiences see there are ways they can apply ancient scripture stories today,” Dennis says. “In that way it would help them be more relevant.”

Through humor and music, the Agles say they help draw the young viewers’ interest so they are invested in the story. They moved from Pasadena, California, to Utah to accommodate their budget and shot the first two of their eight movies at the sound stages at KJZZ near the airport. The Agles shot the last six movies at a studio in Provo.

“We had modest success with our first two DVDs, but when we cast Thurl Bailey, a former Utah Jazz player with a great voice, our series was put on the map, especially locally,” he says. “Another break is that we now work with Vivendi Entertainment, which distributes ‘Veggie Tales’ and ‘Sesame Street.’ Vivendi will distribute ‘Esther and the King’ nationwide in March and plans to distribute additional titles every quarter.

Osmond is excited about the project because he says he considers it excellent family entertainment for all ages. “This is a fresh take on a familiar story, and the cast is so phenomenal. I plan to work really hard on this production.”

To work hard in this case means filming for the DVD at SCERA between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. and then doing a live show that night. In the past Liken the Scripture projects have been designed only for the DVD market, and this is the first time it will be staged as a live musical as well.

In addition to Osmond, Lightstone has cast Summer Sloan as Chloe and Katherine Nelson as the Queen of Nineveh. Sloan was selected from 100 children who auditioned for the part and has played Mary Lennox in "The Secret Garden" at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. Nelson, known to many audiences for her portrayal of Emma Smith in the 2008 film "Emma Smith: My Story," says Liken the Scriptures has helped her love acting as much as her passion as a singer/songwriter/studio vocalist. "It's a real thrill to be acting on stage, and besides, I believe in anything Aaron Edson does. He is amazing and I love his music."

Additionally the Agles are using Gev Manoukian, who was a finalist on the FOX Television show "So You Think You Can Dance" as one of the rival gangs of Ninevites (who also happen to be amazing dancers); Jason Celaya, a choreographer who has choreographed for Brigham Young University's Young Ambassadors, and Doug Ellis as set designer, whose work in this production will include a 20-foot long, two-level boat. Carla Summers is Costume Designer and frequent Hollywood special effects designer Clark Schaffer has designed amazing costumes for the musical's undersea creatures, including the great fish, a trio of sharks, a trio of back-up singers called The Crabelles, and a school of fish at recess.

SCERA President & CEO Adam J. Robertson says the collaboration with Liken The Scriptures has been very positive. "We love to present family-friendly events, and 'Jonah' has a wonderful message about love and acceptance, as well as top-notch production and casting."

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