

Staging a Return

Blackman joins UNH contingent in Seacoast summer theater production

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MICHAEL BLACKMAN, DEAN OF STUDENTS, ADDRESSING INCOMING STUDENTS AT ORIENTATION THIS MONTH. HE'LL BE ON A VERY DIFFERENT STAGE THIS SUMMER AS PART OF THE PRESCOTT PARK ARTS FESTIVAL PRODUCTION OF FOOTLOOSE.

Michael Blackman doesn't hesitate for an instant when considering what's more likely to cause the biggest spike in his nerves – his daily role as dean of students at UNH, or his return to the stage and New Hampshire theater debut in this summer's production of Footloose as part of the Prescott Park Arts Festival in Portsmouth.

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“It will certainly be this,” Blackman says of the performance.

“You’d think after dealing with massive crises and protests and various other student issues that my day-to-day job would be the scarier thing, but I haven’t been on stage in about 10 years.”

Blackman is one of more than a dozen members of the UNH community (including a handful of students who just graduated) who will be involved this summer in a production directed by Tom Alsip, assistant professor and director of the musical theater program at UNH. The show debuts June 24 on the Wilcox Main Stage in Portsmouth's Prescott Park.

Blackman is certainly no stranger to the stage, having taught theater for several years after studying and performing the discipline as an undergrad at NYU. One of the things that most appealed to him about taking a role at UNH was the active theater department, so when Alsip – a classmate of Blackman’s at NYU – reached out about a role, it was too appealing to pass up (the two performed together at NYU in a production of *Into the Woods*, the show Alsip directed this spring at UNH).

“Theater has always been a part of my life, even when I was not teaching or performing. I knew that when I came to New Hampshire I would want to work at a school that had a theater and dance department,” Blackman says. “I was happy to jump at this opportunity.

Blackman will be featured in just six shows throughout the summer run, as his schedule made it difficult to commit to a heavier workload. But that ultimately allowed Alsip to cast his top two choices for the role of Coach Dunbar, as his other



**ZEKE SOLIS, RYAN BEHAN AND
GAVIN BLONDA REHEARSE FOR**

FOOTLOOSE ON THE STAGE AT
UNH. (COURTESY)

first selection had a gap in his schedule in the middle of the slated run that created the perfect opportunity for Blackman to fill in.

Alsip and the rest of the cast have been hard at work over the last several weeks getting ready for a full slate of shows. That group includes performers Zeke Solis, Gavin Blonda, Tia Marie Apicella and Madeleine Aubin, as well as recent graduates James Matthews and Sophie Calderwood, the latter of whom is the show's dance captain.

Other UNH connections include lighting designer Lih-Hwa Yu, set designer Szu-Feng Chen, costume designer Victoria Carot, choreographer Mary Beth Marino, as well as students working in the shop – stage manager Bryson Badeau (who recently graduated and is returning to UNH to pursue a graduate degree), assistant stage manager Natalya Salvati, costume technician Sydney Furtado and master electrician Marissa Gast, who just graduated this spring.

“Working with the Prescott Park Arts Festival is a wonderful opportunity, and being able to cast some of our students is great for them to have a professional credit,” Alsip, who noted that those who secured roles were selected from between 300 and 400 auditioners, says. “Everybody is working so hard, and everybody is very committed to process. I’ve been thrilled so far.”

Beyond a professional credit, those involved in the show will also likely be performing in front of one of the largest audiences of their young careers, as the summer shows in Portsmouth are routinely a significant attraction.

“To land a summer show in the park is one of the biggest draws on the Seacoast,” Alsip says. “These actors will be performing for arguably more people than most other outlets in the summer

because of the open park setting.”

Blackman’s time to experience that same audience energy is fast approaching. And though he doesn’t have any illusions about this return performance sparking a major professional life change – “You won’t be seeing any headlines that Michael Blackman quits his dean of students job to be a full-time performer in the Seacoast area,” he quips – he’s excited to turn his full attention to the role, just as soon as new student orientation wraps up later this month.

“Right now, the monologue I’ve been focused on the most is the 15-to-20-minute welcome that I give to all of our incoming students. But I suspect once June is over and orientation has passed I will switch fully into my new script and getting excited about the show,” he says.

Footloose will run from June 24 to Aug. 14 (Blackman's appearances will be Aug. 4-7 and Aug. 11-12). For a complete schedule of performances and for ticket info, visit the [Prescott Park Arts Festival page](#).

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