

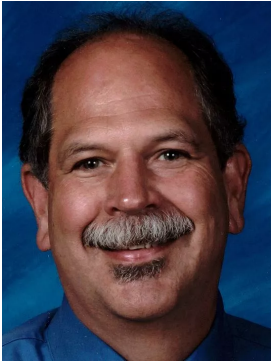
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Russ Saxton says goodbye to 30 years as the theater director for Dixie High

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(Photo: Submitted)

After 30 years and more than 120 shows, Russ Saxton is drawing the final curtain on his career as the theater director at Dixie High School; but in typical Saxton fashion, his final production — “Mary Poppins” — will offer a little bit more than one might expect from a high school show.

Russ Saxton directing “Mary Poppins” in photos

“I’m really doing this show for my wife as my final gift to her before she retires, Saxton said.

“Mary Poppins” has long been Saxton’s wife’s favorite play, and she often teases him that she is “practically perfect” just like the title character.

However, after securing the rights to “Mary Poppins” last December, Saxton decided to take things a step further by inviting five Dixie High alumni who have gone on to work professionally in theater to come back and share their talents with his current students and the community as a whole.

Shayla Osborn Beck, Chelsea Wilson Calder, Trent Cox, Skyler Scott and Rance Wright joined the cast a little more than a week ago, working with the student actors and crew in a collaborative effort Saxton hopes will prove beneficial to all.



(Photo: submitted)

“I’m so honored that he would ask,” said Calder, who participated in Saxton’s productions of “Thoroughly Modern Millie,” “Wizard of Oz” and “Little Women” during her high school career. Now she runs a vocal studio in New York City, has performed in the St. Louis MUNI and the Smith Center in Las Vegas, and is one of the stars of the YouTube “Mormon Girls” videos.

“These kids have been really open and very excited to see us,” Calder said. “I think it’s going to be a really collaborative process and we’ll learn from each other, which I think is the point.”

Beck, Calder, Wright and Scott will step into the production’s four lead roles during the Friday evening and Saturday afternoon performances, while Cox works as an assistant director, filling in wherever Saxton needs him.

“It’s epic,” Cox said. “There’s a lot of emotion going into the show right now.”



Amanda Bartholomew is the current high school student cast as Mary Poppins. Since Beck’s arrival, she has been teaching Beck the choreography and blocking for the show. In exchange Beck is giving Bartholomew tips on how to best deliver her lines and how to get in touch with the character.

“It’s so fun to work with her,” Bartholomew said. “She’s so magical.”

Chelsea Wilson will be performing in “Mary Poppins.” (Photo: submitted)

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"I knew right away that she would help me so much," Bartholomew said. Many in the cast are familiar with Beck's relatively recent credit as the understudy for Elphaba in the national touring company of "Wicked." And while the experience has been a little intimidating for Bartholomew, she said they have all bonded really well.



(Photo: submitted)

Stepping into a role like Mary Poppins with only a week or so to master it is a bit of a stretch, Beck said, but that's one of the reasons she accepted Saxton's invitation. She likes the challenge. And she loves the idea of working with Saxton again.



(Photo: submitted)

"He started my journey as a performer. He's been a support system throughout the years," Beck said. "We all love him so much."

Cox said the entire experience is, "like a big nostalgia machine." After graduating from Weber State University with a degree in acting and directing, Cox has spent the last four years directing shows, mainly in northern Utah. He credits Saxton with much of the inspiration behind his current career.

"I can't express how grateful I am, and how big of an influence Russ was, not just on my theatrical career, but on my life in general," Cox said. "It's inspiring to see him still so passionate about his work."



(Photo: submitted)

His career

Saxton started his formal career at Farrer Middle School in Provo after graduating from Brigham Young University. However, his passion for directing, staging and acting started long before then.

Saxton remembers when he was 8 years old building the sets and staging a play in his backyard. His mom recalls the interest starting when he was just 5.

“It’s been something I’ve done my whole life,” Saxton said.

Two years into his time at Farrer, a position opened at Dixie High School, and Saxton said he will be forever grateful for the chance the administration took on him.

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(Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)

Ross Taylor, the principal of Dixie High at the time, said that “in a sense” they were taking a chance on a relatively new teacher, but “we knew he had really good judgement because he married a Dixie girl,” Taylor said with a laugh.

“He was developing a strong program at the junior high (in Provo), and that’s quite a remarkable feat in itself,” Taylor said.

From the beginning, Taylor said Saxton was “exciting to work with,” and watching the way the students grew in confidence and talent with Saxton’s guidance was, “an inspiration to all of us.”

“Russ brought a lot of the best of Dixie out for the rest of us to see,” Taylor said.

Marcia Smith was a freshman during Saxton’s first year at Dixie High. Her positive impression of him as a teacher has not dimmed over the years. She still considers Saxton to be a “dear, dear man” and a “gifted actor and artist.”



(Photo: submitted)

Back in those early days, the theater program did not have the facility, nor the resources it has now, but Smith said Saxton “did what he could with what he had.”

Although he was happy with the quality of the productions in those early years, Saxton said it wasn’t until his sixth year when they put on “Annie” that he felt he really hit his stride.

Casting a student in the lead role who had been in a professional production of “Annie” in San Francisco before her family moved to St. George, Saxton said she brought a level of professionalism to the program and from that point, things started to take off.

Some of the highlights for Saxton include the opportunity he had to direct “Phantom of the Opera” in 2010. Dixie High was among the first high schools in the United States to get the rights to perform that show.



Dixie High School Theater Director Russ Saxton coaches his cast during a rehearsal for their upcoming performance of "Mary Poppins" on Thursday, Oct. 29, 2015. (Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)

His all-time favorite, however, is "Les Miserables," which he produced two different years and is one of only five shows that he's repeated in his career.

Although he has spent his life working around the stage, Saxton said he is not really one for the spotlight. He prefers to be "dressed in black in the corner."

"I'm really a techy at heart," Saxton said.

The outpouring of support he has received for his final production has been overwhelming, but he said he "cannot wait to see all my former students at the reunion Saturday afternoon."

The reunion

Spearheaded by Smith, any student who came through Saxton's theater program is invited to a reunion Saturday following the 1 p.m. matinee of "Mary Poppins."

After discussing the idea with a friend last summer, Smith took the idea of a theater reunion and ran with it, starting a Facebook group that at her last check had around 860 members.

Initially, Smith thought about keeping the reunion a surprise for Saxton, but she said she wanted him to be able to enjoy the event, and she has tried to abide his wishes to avoid doing anything that will "eulogize him."



(Photo: submitted)

Instead there will be a recap of all of his shows, some alumni performances and a contest to find the biggest Saxton fan, followed by karaoke-style singing of songs from each of the major productions in the last 30 years.

“I think a lot of people would like the chance to come say thank you for how he impacted their lives,” Smith said. “So much of what he did has little to do with putting on a good show.”

This year in his theater classes, Saxton said he has focused even more on the importance of leaving a legacy in your life, and he is careful to remind students that even though things like a high school play can seem all encompassing, it is “a little blip in the course of your life.”

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(Photo: Chris Caldwell / The Spectrum & Daily News)

“He reminds us to take a step back, that there are always more important things,” Bartholomew said.

Those important things, like the relationships he’s built over the years, is what Saxton said he can’t wait to celebrate this weekend.

“I have very mixed emotions. This is my last show that I will direct for Dixie High School,” Saxton said.

His next move will be to continue adjunct teaching in the theater department at Dixie State University, with the possibility of moving to a full-time position there, teaching theater methods to students wanting to become drama teachers.

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“Teaching isn’t a job; it’s a calling,” Saxton said, adding that as an artist, theater is something he can’t not do. “If I didn’t do it, it would be like cutting off my right arm.”

Still, when he sees the curtain close on this school year, he knows the time is right to move on.

“I’ve had a wonderful run... It’s time for somebody else to have their 30 years,” Saxton said.

“Mary Poppins” will take place Nov. 5, 6, 7 and 9 at 7:30 p.m. in the Dixie High School auditorium. There will be a matinee at 1 p.m. Saturday for the general public and Dixie High theater alumni. Tickets are available online at showtix4u.com. Call Dixie High School at 435-673-4682 for more information.

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