

# Zesty 'Zorba'

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"Beware Greeks bearing gifts" is great advice – if the gift in question is a Trojan Horse.

But if it's a new theatre, the Greeks may be more welcome. At least, that's what Blackfriars Theatre actors are hoping.

On Sept. 19, a lusty Greek peasant named Zorba will open Blackfriars' 120-seat hall at 795 Main St. The hero of the musical *Zorba* embraces life with gusto, no matter what. Blackfriars' leaders have made him their role model as they tackle the anxious final phase of their theatre construction.

"We're behind in our construction with a lot left to do," says artistic director John Haldoupis. "Most people facing this much pressure would go out of their mind. But I'm going to figure out a way to meet this deadline."

Meanwhile, his cast is rehearsing in Blackfriars' former building at 28 Lawn St. The production is intricate with 22 cast members, 17 scenes, and zesty Greek dancing that viewers may remember from the 1964 movie version with Anthony Quinn.

The musical differs from the film in several key respects. Quinn dances and womanizes on location on the Greek island of Crete. The musical must evoke the sea, sky and whitewashed stone with slide projections and impressionistic sets.

More important, the young man Zorba befriends changes his nationality for the stage version. Instead of being an uptight Englishman, Niko is an American teacher who has just inherited an old mine by a Cretian village. While waiting in a café, he meets Zorba, who boasts that he can help Niko reopen the mine.

"My character wants a new start and is willing to take some risks," says Jason Mincer, who portrays Niko. "Zorba helps me open up to think with my heart sometimes, instead of my head."

Playing Zorba is Ken Harrington, a veteran actor who has appeared at Blackfriars, Geva Theatre Center, and Downstairs Cabaret Theatre. He admires the musical's two best known stars – Herschel Bernardi and Quinn – and will try to match their gruff charisma without swilling too many ouzos before each show. "I don't know if anyone else thought of me, a nice Irish Catholic kid, playing Zorba," says Harrington. "But I saw myself fitting right in. While I love Quinn and Bernardi, I'm going to make this role my own."

Since rehearsals began on Aug. 7, he and other cast members have been learning Greek dances from choreographer Meggins Kelley. "They're very earthy and really reflect how these villagers live," says **Janine Mercandetti** who plays the widow romanced by Niko.

The villagers' costumes were found largely on eBay. Whenever Haldoupis noticed a promising outfit on his home computer, he'd send the intended actor the eBay link and ask: "What do you think?" His online wardrobe choices needed very little tailoring, boasts.

The new theatre, however, has required a lot of nips and tucks. Once a Bluebird bus center, it has gotten new doors, drywall, electrical wiring and risers. Still to come are the carpets, lighting and fresh paint. The elaborate new stage will wait, since *Zorba* can be performed on the floor.

So both onstage and off, Blackfriars fans will find new beginnings this month. It may take awhile for the troupe to adjust to its long-awaited home. *Zorba*, however, will move on quickly to the next young dancer, and the next village.