

ARTS

A game-changer: Underdogs take on the political system

Jon Brusckke's debut musical

By **Greg Hardesty**,
contributing writer

Jon Brusckke knew he was onto something big when he overheard his 16-year-old daughter, Andromeda, singing at home.

But she wasn't belting out a tune by one of her favorites, Taylor Swift.

Rather, the Fullerton Union High School student was singing a song from her father's first musical, "Change the Game," staged Jan. 5-6 at the Laguna Beach Cultural Arts Center and being shopped around for potential performances at other venues.

Brusckke is a professor and speech and debate coach at CSUF, so a musical isn't the first thing that comes to mind when guessing a pet project of his.

But Brusckke, who's been playing the keyboards and writing songs since he was 18 years old, is a member of the "three-chord rock band" True to the Universe, a longtime fixture on Orange County's live music scene.

So, tunes are in his blood.

And Brusckke's multicultural and high-achieving speech and debate team at CSUF was the inspiration of "Change the Game," a story about grassroots empowerment, local politics, a patchwork community of young adults from different ethnic backgrounds, and with the message that maybe it's not how to win, but rather how to change the game.

As for Andromeda singing her father's original songs?

She's one of the 14 members of the cast of "Change the Game," many of whom are CSUF alumni or current students.

Andromeda, who has been dancing since age 3 and sings and acts, plays a student/reporter and is one of five members of a quasi-chorus who perform in the musical.

The plot

The plot centers on students at the fictional Cal State San Marita who convince their political philosophy professor to take on big-money developers and run for local office. It's a story of underdogs who take on the system by coming together to make a difference in the world by changing their community.

"They succeed not by beating people at their own game but by changing what



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JON BRUSCKKE

"Change the Game," written and directed by CSUF speech and debate professor Jon Brusckke, was staged at the Laguna Beach Cultural Arts Center early this month.

the game is about," said Brusckke, the musical's writer, producer and director who for the last six years has served as chair of CSUF's Department of Communication Studies.

"They realize they must make the world better for everyone and not just for themselves," said Brusckke, who began his career at CSUF in 1997 after attending the university as an undergrad-

uate (1984-88) and earning his doctorate in communication from the University of Utah in 1994.

'Cooking with ideas'

Brusckke grew up in Salt Lake City and fell in love with speech and debate in high school when he had to take it as an elective after the metal shop class filled up.

"My brain was cooking with ideas at the

time, and I latched onto it," he recalled.

He says coaching CSUF's speech and debate team has been the most meaningful thing he's done in his life.

"What set us apart is we would get a variety of students — Latinx kids, Vietnamese, Chinese, etc.," Brusckke said of his early years as speech and debate coach. "They'd all come together in one room. We were always overmatched by USC, Harvard, Northwestern, and other powerhouse speech and debate teams. But by the time our students were seniors, they were competing nationally."

In 2004, the CSUF speech and debate team hit a high-water mark with an appearance in the quarterfinals of the National Debate Tournament.

Brusckke said his experience with the speech and debate team informed the plot of his musical.

"Seemingly every demographic came together, and it made them feel they belonged," he said of his speech and debate team.

"What I would love to be is the Gene Roddenberry of musical theater," added Brusckke, referring to the creator of "Star Trek" on TV. "I want to be the guy who brings everyone together and helps build a future where everyone is included and has a place."

'Not going to end here'

Brusckke began working on "Change the Game" in the spring of 2020. He would bounce ideas off bandmate and CSUF philosophy professor Andrew Howat.

In August 2022, the musical had its first workshop performance at the Maverick Theater in Fullerton. A year later, four shows were held at the Chance Theater in Anaheim.

Musical arrangements in "Change the Game" are by Howat and Brusckke.

Brusckke's son, Milo, 20, co-wrote the lyrics with his father. The 17 songs in the musical originally were recorded in Howat's home studio. A key hip-hop section was contributed by Tyrone Stokes, who goes by the stage name Lyrically Twisted.

Brusckke said he hopes "Change the Game" will be staged again soon.

"It was a blast, and it's not going to end here," Brusckke said. "I made a promise to the cast that I will push this as far as we can make it go."

For more information about "Change the Game" visit changethegamemusical.wordpress.com.