

Stage Struck

July 2010

A look at the world of live theater in Bucks and Montgomery.

By Brenda Lange

“All the world’s a stage.”

— “As You Like It” by William Shakespeare



Sometimes it may feel as if a large part of the world of Bucks and Montgomery counties actually is a stage. Dozens of theaters and productions offer something for everyone. From drama to comedy to musicals to children’s theater, one might take in a different show nearly every weekend, and still miss a few.

Although not built in Shakespeare’s day, the Bucks County Playhouse (www.buckscountyplayhouse.com, 215-862-2041) on the Delaware River in New Hope is one of the oldest venues for live performances in the region. Considered a national landmark, the Playhouse is well known for attracting celebrities from around the country, including John Travolta, Liza Minnelli, Robert Redford, and even Grace Kelly, before she became a princess.

The Playhouse opened in 1939 with a performance of the drama, “Springtime for Henry.” Housed in a building that was originally a grist mill, the professional Playhouse quickly became a magnet for summer productions that went on to run on Broadway. The popular musical, “42nd Street” is currently playing there through July 25, followed by Rodgers & Hammerstein’s “The King & I.”

About ten years later, another theater appeared on the scene. The Langhorne Players Theatre Company (www.langhorneplayers.org, 215-860-0818) was founded

in 1947 by Ed Macon using a rustic barn as performance space. After nearly 30 years of searching for a permanent home, the Players finally settled into the Spring Garden Mill in Tyler State Park in Newtown in 1976.

It wasn't easy converting an old mill into a theater, but the members rolled up their sleeves and did much of the work themselves as they installed plumbing, lighting, and importantly for a theater company—a stage. Now known as the Betty Davis Memorial Theater in memory of a deceased member, the space seats 73 in air-conditioned comfort, and presents art shows in the lobby gallery.

The political satire, “November” by David Mamet runs at the Mill July 16 through the 31st.

Formed in 1996 by a group of actors who wanted to put on the best possible productions with non-equity performers, the Actors' NET (www.actorsnetbucks.org, 215-295-3694) is a not-for-profit regional company that presents a variety of shows each year at the Heritage Center in Morrisville. In addition to tried-and-true classics and musicals, the NET presents original works designed to appeal to a wide audience while giving local actors a chance to develop their skills.

Actors' NET needed a base of operations, and the Borough of Morrisville had a large garage sitting empty, so the two groups formed a partnership as part of the town's riverfront development project.

“It's unusual for a municipality and theater to be in a partnership, but it was a win-win situation for us all,” explains Nancy Sherlock, President of the Morrisville Borough Council. “The (municipal) garage was empty, and the theater was looking for a home. Lots of volunteers helped bring this together. It's worked well, and their plays are always very good.”

“We consider ourselves very fortunate to have this partnership with Morrisville,” says Joe Doyle, who founded the Actors' NET with his wife Cheryl. “Besides our regular productions, we're able to provide an additional resource for the kids in the town, where the arts program has been cut back in the local schools.”

As many local theater companies do, Actors' NET runs a training program—Summer Stars—for aspiring young actors, singers and dancers.

“We're also putting on our seventh production of ‘1776’ over the weekend of August 20, working with the Morrisville Business Association as part of its Revolutionary weekend,” Doyle added.

Stephen Sondheim's fantasy, “Into the Woods” is currently being presented through July 25.

Professionals, all

Community theater productions rely heavily on its volunteers. Even the actors are often volunteers, which doesn't mean they aren't pros. Aside from those on the stage, multiple volunteers are needed behind the scenes. Hairstylists and makeup artists, seamstresses, carpenters, set designers, ushers, ticket takers, light, sound and special effect specialists, producers, directors, dressers and prop masters support and enable local productions to happen seamlessly.

"Actors are dedicated to their craft," says Kevin Korowicki, a Doylestown actor and director who's been involved locally since 1989, starting with his first performance as the lead in Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest" at Town & Country Players in Buckingham.

"We are professionals, we just don't get paid," he says. "I do it because it's my passion."

Passionate volunteers enable shows to go on at most local theaters. Even in equity theaters, those required to use a certain number of paid actors represented by the Actors' Equity union, many of the actors are unpaid and perform for the love of their craft.

The Bristol Riverside Theater (www.BRTstage.org, 215-785-6664) on Radcliffe Street in Bristol, is one such professional theater. Located in a renovated movie theater, the BRT has offered top-notch performances since 1986 in a house seating 300 with high-quality lighting and sound systems.

Midnight Productions (www.midnightpro.com, 215-794-3378) is another professional theater group, with a twist. Regionally acclaimed for its lavish productions, the troupe doesn't have a permanent theater, but presents its shows in various local venues. One of the best known shows is its annual production of "Jesus Christ Superstar" at the Keswick Theater in Glenside.

A small theater with a large following is the Town & Country Players group on Route 263 in Buckingham. (www.townandcountryplayers.org, 215-348-7566) Formed 60 years ago, the players perform in a 240-year old converted barn, with theater-in-the-round seating.

Gay McPhee, an elementary school teacher in the Central Bucks District, and her husband, Andy, have been involved with T&C Players for years. Both of them act, and Andy also directs. The theater is in their blood, in fact, it's how the couple met—performing the leads in a Connecticut production of "Fiddler on the Roof"—roles they reprised several years ago at T&C.

"Community theater is so important," Gay McPhee says. "We're fortunate here to be in an area with so many talented people. People can come and watch and just drink in the experience."

This is especially true in the close quarters at Town & Country, where “people sometimes actually have their feet on the stage they sit so close,” she says, “which adds to the amazing experience for both the actors and audience.”

Town & Country also has a long history of performing for youngsters, beginning in 1956 with a performance of “Pinocchio.” The theater is a popular place for family outings, with this summer’s production of “Annie” at the end of July and “Little Women” in October.

Doing it their way

Five couples went out together to see a play in 1952. Later, the ten friends agreed they could do better, and decided to start their own playhouse. They called a meeting in their community and more than two dozen folks showed up. Within a year the fledgling group had rented an empty former auction building; named their group the Dutch Country Players (www.dcptheatre.com, 215-234-0966) since the area was known as Dutch Country; and raised necessary start up money through a rummage and plant sale. The group was up and running—with their first show, a comedy, “Apple of His Eye.”

DCP has survived loss of two of its theaters from fire and associated ups and downs. Today it is respected around the region for its high-quality productions for adults and children and theater camp for kids. The comedy “The Queen of Bingo” is showing at DCP July 12 through August 8.

Now in its 12th year, Act II Playhouse, a professional theater in Ambler, is currently presenting “Burt & Me,” a musical comedy. Act II (www.act2playhouse.org, 215-654-0200). Act II bills itself as a “world-class theatre in a venue whose intimacy draws audiences and actors into dynamic interaction.” Special productions are presented each season, in addition to new play development along with staging a world or regional premiere every season. Act II’s mission includes education and they provide a summer camp, workshops and other programs to interested students.

One of the newer performing groups in the region is Village Productions (www.villageproductions.org, 610-970-1199) in Pottstown. Truly a grassroots endeavor, the founding group was comprised of artists, educators and residents who came together in 2001 to establish performing arts opportunities for their community. Village Productions also hosts a Summer Concert Series, with performances this month by on The Jen Chapin Trio on July 16, and The Travis Wetzel Trio on July 30.

The Montgomery Theater (www.montgomerytheater.org, 215-723-9984) is a not-for-profit group in Souderton, which opened for business with its first performance: “The William” in June 1993. The turn-of-the-century Souderton firehouse is home to the group, whose 122-seat theater operates in what was once the engine room. The

theater has become the centerpiece of the revitalization efforts of the Souderton-Telford communities. Productions include a full range of offerings from musical to drama to performance art.

As with most of the region's local theaters, The Village Players of Hatboro (www.thevillageplayers.com, 215-675-6774) bring together a large band of dedicated volunteers to provide quality performances for the surrounding community. The group has presented comedies, dramas and benefit performances for 62 years. Memberships and season tickets offer additional perks, as well as the opportunity to get deeply involved in community affairs. Typical to this area, the venue is a renovated barn; theirs was once home to dairy cows in the early 1800s. For more information on local and regional theaters, shows they offer and ways to get involved, visit the following websites: www.stagepartners.org, www.theatrealliance.org, www.findtheater.com, www.townliving.com. Brenda Lange is a professional writer and editor in Bucks County (www.brendalange.com).