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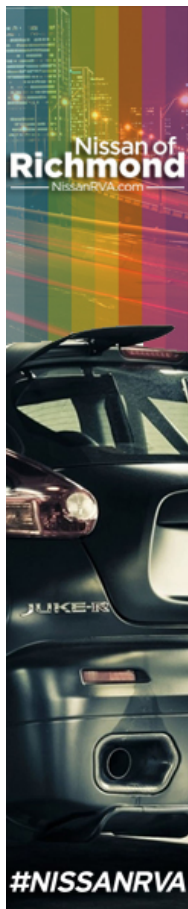
Ashland Summer Theatre Festival aims to update classics with a family audience in mind

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FRED KAUFMAN
AUGUST 3, 2016

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Ashland's own Whistle Stop Theatre Company will host its first annual Ashland Summer Theatre Festival Aug. 13. The festival features theatrical productions whose scripts were written by Whistle Stop's artistic director and award-winning playwright, Louise Ricks.

Editor's Note: GayRVA's Theatre Critic Fred Kaufman is directing and acting in one of the plays listed below.

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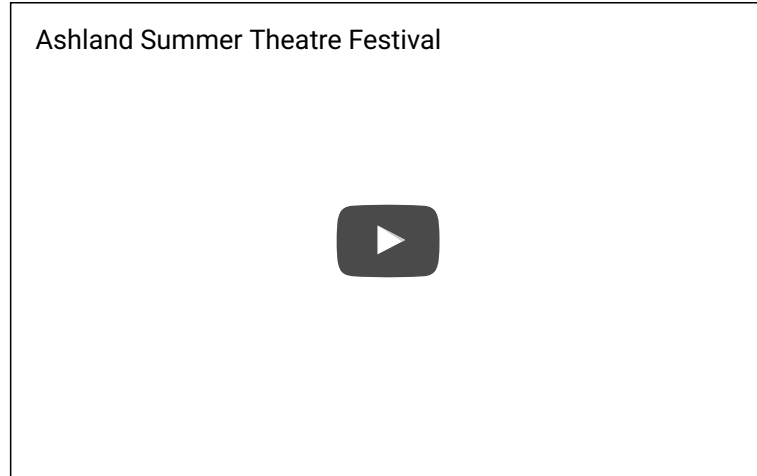
- Never - I'm out and everyone knows
- When I'm at work or school - I'm not out there
- When I'm with family - I'm not out to them
- When I'm with work and family, but I'm out to my friends
- I'm still in the closet and not out at all

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The Whistle Stop was founded four years ago by Ms. Ricks, acting as Artistic Director, while her Mother acts as managing director and costume mistress and her Father is the technical director.

Since then the Company's shows have been produced all over the country. The Whistle Stop makes it their goal to provide quality family theatre to Ashland.

The three productions that will be performed at this year's festival are modern adaptations of classic stories, including "Beauty and the Beast Tamer," "Peter Pan: When Wendy Grew Up" and "Alice in Wonderland."



"None of these shows will be Disney, but Disney wasn't the original storyteller either," Ricks says. "I'm trying to take the original stories and make them relevant for audiences today."

Beauty and The Beast Tamer takes the original tale by Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve and sets it in a turn of the century circus. The Ring Mistress of the circus has made it her business to find any evil doers and teach them a lesson by performing in her circus. Then a Beautiful young girl becomes the Beast Tamer and the circus is never the same.

Peter Pan: When Wendy Grew Up picks up at the end of J.M. Barie's novel when Peter discovers Wendy has grown up. In his rage he takes Wendy's daughter, Jane to Neverland. Wendy has no choice but to become the new Captain Hook and save her daughter.

Alice in Wonderland comes right off the pages of the book. Alice wakes up and finds that she is not the same as she once was and is in a new world she can't find her way out of. Can she keep her temper and discover who she really is in Wonderland?

"We wanted to bring out the best parts of the stories that have lasted for eons and introduce them to a whole new generation," Ricks says.

The performances run about 30 minutes each, and are intended for all age groups. Each production will be performed three times during the day, at noon, 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. This allows viewers to attend each of these half hour-long productions, choosing which order to watch the performances before walking to the next.

"We set up the locations so families could walk from one location to the next," Ricks said. *Beauty and the Beast Tamer* will be performed at the Hanover Arts and Activities Center. *Peter Pan* and *Alice in Wonderland* will be held at Ashland Coffee & Tea and the Ashland Theatre, respectively.

Local businesses are also joining in on the spirit of the festival. According to Ricks, the Ashland Sweet Frog will have special flavors on the day of the festival, such as 'White Rabbit,' to commemorate characters from the classic stories. Ricks also mentioned that Newfound Gathering Place is hosting a Mad Hatter tea party during the day.

As for the significance of the festival in Ashland: Ashland prides itself as being an artist colony, perfect to raise a family in or settle down. So a children's theatre festival is just what the community needs to support local artists and provide live theatre to the town.

"We're trying to make it something that isn't just about the theatre but about the town coming together and showing off how much fun you can have in one day in Ashland," Ricks said.

"We spend a week rehearsing, just one week, and put it on up. Everybody really has to come together with their lines memorized and ready to go, and it's just a whirlwind,"

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FRIEND ACTIVITY



Ricks said. "That's why we called it 'Whistle Stop', you hop off the train, you get what you need, and you get right back on."

Ricks estimated that the performers' ages range from the youngest actor being about 10-years-old, to adult actors in their 50's.

"Our goal is to really bring professional artists, first and foremost, and introduce younger artists to a professional theatrical production," Ricks said.

"We really just want to focus on bringing good, quality theater to Ashland," Ricks said.

Tickets for the festival begin at \$5 for a single ticket to one performance, \$10 for one viewer to attend all three shows, and \$25 for family passes to each show.

Beauty and The Beast Tamer at the Hanover Arts and Activities Center

Peter Pan: When Wendy Grew Up at Ashland Coffee and Tea

Alice in Wonderland at the Ashland Theatre

Performances are 12:00, 2:00 and 4:00pm

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