



BWW Feature: THE ASHLAND SUMMER THEATRE FESTIVAL: A BEHIND-THE-SCENES COMMENTARY

by Brent Deekens Aug. 9, 2018

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Photography Provided by Louise Ricks' Photography with Assistance from Terrie Elam

While most all of my current coverage of the local Richmond theatre scene has been

constructively confined to professional theatrical venues, when the occasion strikes that a community theatre operation serves to the intercommoned benefits of social areas such as children's education, community awareness, municipal pride and an increased volume in local business transactions, the journalist in me smells a story...

Such is the case with the Ashland Summer Theatre Festival: a day-long presentation of three children's musicals housed within the Hanover Arts and Activities Center not far from Ashland's picturesque and rather Americana-invoking Main Street.

On one rehearsal night, upon arriving at the Greek revival-style building on Railroad Street, I stepped through the double doors to be greeted by a welcoming cast of volunteer actors, as well as the writer and director of the pieces: my friend, thespian and Ashland native Louise Ricks.

Founding her Whistle Stop Theatre Company in 2013, children's theatre has been among Ms. Ricks' chief passions for the majority of her life. Her ever-positive disposition aside, the importance she views children's theatre to bear upon the overall betterment of society is actually quite deep.

"As I see it, around us, there is growing empathy problem," remarked Ms. Ricks, "and children's theatre has a way of teaching empathy to children that can branch out into the rest of the world."

The Whistle Stop Theatre Company, in partnership with the Center Players of Ashland, have made it their mission to educate and make theatre-lovers out of children - there are even scholarship opportunities for child-age participants in the Center Players' yearly productions.

As for the Ashland Summer Theatre Festival offerings: onlookers will be treated to a "song and dance" reimagining of the fairy tales RUMPLESTILTSKIN, THUMBELINA, as well as CATTYWAMPUSED: AMERICAN FOLK TALES, an adaptation of a few "tall tales" from the nation's legendary oral histories. The music and lyrics of these works were penned by Ms. Ricks' friend and colleague Samuel Aaron who is currently teaching music in South Korea.

The cast themselves play a variety of roles in each of these pieces premiering for one day on August 11th: with THUMBELINA'S curtain going up at 12:00 PM, CATTYWAMPUSED: AMERICAN FOLK TALES at 2:00 PM, and closing with RUMPELSTILTSKIN at 4:00 PM. With each show each being less than forty-five minutes

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in length, give or take (a typical characteristic among children's shows), guests of the plays are highly encouraged to use the interim to pleasantly traipse about Main Street to possibly dine at a local boîte or traverse among its quaint shops for recreation or apparel.

As such, entities such as the Ashland Main Street Association have welcomed this bi-annual festival with gracious accolades.

Sara Holloway, executive director of the Hanover Arts and Activities Center, concurs with these sentiments.

"Businesses appreciate any community function that brings consumers to the community," noted Ms. Holloway. "We're fiercely proud of this little niche that we have."

Moreover, local charities are making an appearance on Saturday. Butterfly Babies Ministries Incorporated will be taking donations of food and school items for underserved children. Patrons can also participate in their "Share a Seat" program for underserved children to view local theatre as well.

I'll also comment that, given my personal perusal of the scripts, adults should find these pieces charming to their own matured attitudes.

"[Louise] always puts in *tasteful* adult jokes when she's writing a show," chuckled Katherine Ward Stinnett, one of the festival's actors and longtime collaborator of Ms. Ricks.

Terrie Elam, another company member and subsequent choreographer to the festival, also voiced her enthusiasm.

"They're great! I think *Cattywampus* is hilarious," said Ms. Elam who, incidentally, has known Ms. Ricks since their days in middle school together.

Other cast members include the talents of Avery Inge, Annie Forsberg Zannetti, Darren Lage, Joel White, Roger Reynolds (who also serves as the musical director), Kyle Dawson, Ann Graham Davis (who also serves as the assistant director), and Caitlin Rose Sneed in no particular order.

Incidentally, meeting these new people (and reengaging with some of them who happen to be withstanding friends) in their rehearsal process made for a convivial evening for me. Making my thinking assert that they'll be just as receptive, if not more so, to a future audience.

Tickets for all three shows are only \$10.

Ashland has all of the markings of a typical small town, but its influence, culture and much of its actual architecture carry a unique and cozy feel. Its history bears this, too; even with me. My departed maternal grandfather was, as I understand it, raised in the "Springfield Farm" house right next door to Patrick Henry High School. His old school house is the white building where the Independence Ruritan Club currently meets, and some of his immediate family are buried right next door at the Independence Christian Church graveyard.

Thus this festival has a something of a small, familial resonance with me.

And as a means for giving something back to their small but lovingly-appreciated "ville," it is to the upstanding credit of all of these artists, volunteers, educators, charity organizers, and business proprietors that work to give Ashland its due notice, as well as exercising efforts towards improving the conditions of the public in various capacities.

Ashland itself is, and will always remain, a great getaway for everyday passersby with their hectic commutes on Route 1 and I-95 to just take a long, peaceful constitutional through some of Ashland's serene surroundings.

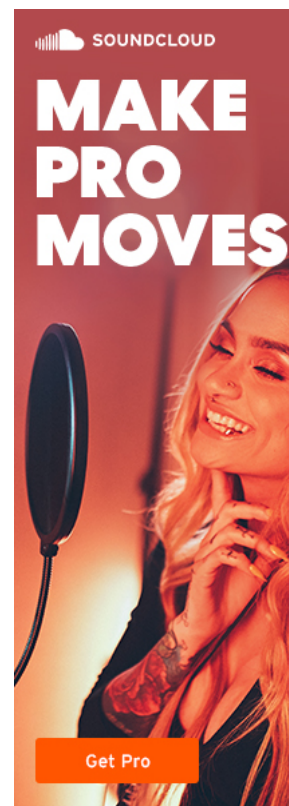
And Ms. Ricks and her compatriots can ably service that consideration, with the smiles of grateful children to complement said experience.

The ASHLAND SUMMER THEATRE FESTIVAL takes place on the 11th of August, 2018

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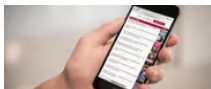
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Brent Deekens is an actor, singer, playwright, and occasional director/dancer. Brent's play The Currency premiered Off-Off-Broadway in 2015, and he continues to write for future (read more...)

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