

Spirit

LIFE

B12 Wednesday, May 10, 2017

BETH BATDORF

Hungry for theater that's provocative and entertaining? One word: Shepherdstown.

I love live theater.

And I have an extraordinary love of the Contemporary American Theater Festival, which takes place this year in three theaters on the Shepherd University campus in Shepherdstown through most of July.

Years before my husband and I moved from D.C. to Shepherdstown more than a decade ago, we first learned of CATF when we heard Ed Herendeen, the festival's founder and producing director, talking on National Public Radio about the four plays that were being produced that year.

Ed's enthusiasm was contagious and we began to come to the festival from Washington. Ed's passion about producing new works that are "provocative, serious and entertaining" is the driving force behind the

festival. Some people have nicknamed him the "Yes We Can Do It" producing director.

The festival's 27th season happens July 7 to July 30 and will feature Equity actors and professional stage managers, costume, lighting and set designers.

There is very exciting news this year in that CATF has expanded its offerings from five plays to six new works that capture a snapshot of the current American landscape.

There are four world premieres, "Welcome to Fear City" by Kara Lee Corthron; "Wild Horses" by Allison Gregory; "Everything is Wonderful" by Chelsea Marcantel; and "We Will Not Be Silent" by David Meyers as well as two new plays, "The Niceties" by Eleanor Burgess and "Byhailia Mississippi" by Evan Linder.

If you live in the area and have never been to a CATF production, I'd like to encourage you to come

(See CATF Page B10)



Actress Margaret Ivey (right, with Damian Thompson in "pen/man/ship" at last summer's CATF) will return for the 2017 season. The festival cast is set to arrive in early June to begin rehearsals.

SETH FREEMAN



ABOVE: The 2011 Contemporary American Theater Festival featured Tamara Tunie, an actress familiar to fans of the NBC police drama "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit." LEFT: Ed Herendeen created the Contemporary American Theater Festival in 1991 and remains its producing director.

CATF

FROM PAGE B12

to at least one play this summer, or even better, see all six productions.

There are also opportunities to meet the actors, playwrights, design staff and student interns informally. The festival also includes lectures and other special events that are free and open to anyone.

Two of my favorite programs are "Lunch with Art," when you have the opportunity to ask questions of the actors and actresses, and "Breakfast with Ed." Tickets to these typically sell out fast.

The CATF team

The amazing festival happens with a year-round staff of just Ed and four other people: Peggy McKowen, the associate producing director; Joshua Midgett, the general manager; Gabrielle Tokach, the public relations manager; and Vicki Willman, the director of development.

Also on the CATF team are Trent Kugler, who works for Shepherd University during the academic year as the technical director of the Arts, Music and Theater Department as as CATF production manager, and Chase Molden, Shepherd's technical director who serves as production supervisor for CATF.

If you have the chance to talk with CATF staff, do – staff members really value the contribution that the audience members make to the theater experience. Ed is always saying that there is no theater without an audience.

The work begins way before the actors and designers arrive in town in early June. Ed reads about 100 plays before deciding on the lineup.

He takes only plays submitted by agents, and often reads several plays by a playwright before finding one he feels compelled to produce.

He has to consider the casting needs for all the plays as he makes the decisions about every new season. The plays are done in rotating repertory and many cast members appear in more than one play.



SETH FREEMAN

Selecting the casts

Casting is handled by Pat McKorkle, a member of the Casting Society of America, the professional group of about 700 casting directors for film, television and theatre. Most of the auditions take place in New York City, where McKorkle is based.

It is so much fun watching the new actors and playwrights arrive at the beginning of the season for rehearsal just three weeks before previews. Some are clearly shell-shocked as they realize they are in a rural area in a very small town. But by the beginning of July, they are an integral part of the community fabric. You see them on the C&O towpath, in restaurants, grocery stores, churches and everywhere, taking in the many riches of our area.

Susan Miller, the playwright for last year's "20th Century Blues," invited many of her New

York City and Washington, D.C. actress friends to Shepherdstown, and I feel certain that many of them will be in the audience at this year's plays.

"20 Century Blues" will open off-Broadway later this year.

Familiar faces

In the summer of 2011, I remember being in Target in Martinsburg and it seemed as though the entire store was showing off cell phone pictures taken with Tamara Tunie, the actress who was part of the CATF play "We are Here" by Tracy Thorne – and a face familiar to fans of TV's "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" where she portrayed medical examiner Melinda Warner.

If you attended last year's festival, you will be happy to know that Jason Babinsky and Margaret Ivey are returning. Jason appeared in "The Wed-

LEFT: Jason Babinsky (shown with Mary Suib in the 2016 Contemporary American Theater Festival play, "20th Century Blues") will again be part of the festival in Shepherdstown when the new season kicks off July 7.

WANT TO GO? What: Contemporary American Theater Festival **When:** Matinee and evening performances Tuesdays to Sundays July 7 to July 30 **Where:** Three venues on the campus of Shepherd University **What else:** For tickets and other festival details, go to catf.org or call 800-999-CATF

ding Gift" and "20th Century Blues" and Margaret appeared in "20th Century Blues" and in "penman/ship."

Get tickets

It is not too early to buy tickets as some of the performances in the smaller theaters are already sold out even though there are more than 100 performances including – for the first time – on Tuesday evenings. You can purchase tickets online at catf.org or call the CATF box office at 800-999-CATF.

There are special discounts for West Virginia residents, students, military and groups. The popular Pay-What-You-Can previews will happen the week before opening night, July 2 to 6. For details about discount options and other information, call the box office. The festival staff members are always happy to help.

– Beth Batdorf, a CATF board member, writes from her home in Shepherdstown and says she'd be delighted to talk with anyone with questions about the festival. Send an email to bethbatdorf@msn.com

