

Backstage Access: CATF makes theater more accessible

May 2, 2017

[Local News](#)

Tim Cook

Staff writer

**tcook@journal-
news.net**



Journal photo by Tim Cook
Jeanne Muir, of Shepherdstown, has seen many plays and behind-the-scenes events serving as a board member for the Contemporary American Theater Festival since 2005.

SHEPHERDSTOWN — Jeanne Muir is no theater snob. Pearl-handled opera glasses would never fit her style.

Down to earth and quick with a self-effacing laugh, Muir readily offers that she's not a theater expert.

"I know nothing about theater," she said with genuine modesty.

In recent years, however, Muir has learned more about theater because of her volunteer work with her neighborhood festival. That festival, however, just happens to be the Contemporary American Theater Festival, a nationally acclaimed and increasingly internationally recognized cultural landmark event.

Muir is an avid booster of the event, which drew about 2,500 to the town of 800 residents last July. Not surprisingly, she has become a fan of the CATF through hard work as a festival board member since 2005.

"I've lived in Boston, Manhattan and Philadelphia before a move here," she said. *"It would be hard to find a community in those towns that could pull this kind of thing off the way we do. It's just an amazing amount of dedication and time that people put into it."*

Muir is one of the many Jefferson County and Eastern Panhandle residents and business owners who play a vital role in supporting the festival with their energy and talents. Their volunteer work has been indispensable in building a world-class theater festival in Shepherdstown for the past 27 years.

Muir has volunteered for CATF since 2005, shortly before serving as a board member for the festival. She currently serves as the board's marketing committee chairman. Among a wide range of catch-all advice and hands-on assistance, she helps promote ticket sales and sponsorship funding for the festival has her spending five to 10 hours a week during the spring leading up to the event. One of the six-member marketing committee's goals is to

increase the number of groups attending the festival, she said.

According to Muir, her backstage catbird seat with CATF has been interesting and fun, exposing her to the inside operational dynamics of the festival. She has even learned a bit of theater lingo, too.

Because of her work, Muir personally knows playwrights, directors, set designers and a whole of number of the more than 100 cast of theater professionals from all over the country who come to town every summer. Some theater professionals stay in dorms on the Shepherd University campus, and sometimes even in the homes of local residents, including Muir's home.

“We do get some actors who come back over and over again,” she said. “I usually get to meet those people and know them a little bit. That’s fun.”

Backstage perks from her work as a volunteer include the ability to read the plays chosen for the festival beforehand, hear practice readings of plays by actors and attend casting screenings.

“When you come to see a play, you don’t realize all the moving parts,” she said. “There’s a lot of behind-the-scenes stuff that I think you just don’t have an appreciation for until you work on it a little bit.”

One of the first things she learned through the festival was the concept of a repertory theater, where actors stand ready to perform roles in multiple plays. The format creates a host of production complications, but offers tremendous variety and options to theater-goers. With help from four staff members, Ed Herendeen, CATF's founder and producing director, mostly manages the many creative variables.

“He has to consider, not just plays being good in and of themselves, but how they work in the repertory and how they work for casting,” Muir explained. “It’s a very complicated map he has to put together in terms of which

characters he can cast for both plays and actually casting them is a whole other challenge.”

Her experience with the CATF has given her another outlet for thoughtful conversations, she said. Muir also likes the live energy of theater, along with the nuances, evolutions and unpredictability of the creative process involved with performances. For this reason, some theater-goers enjoy attending more than one performance of the same play.

“There’s usually not endings, a resolution at the end of the play, for contemporary theater performances,” Muir said. *“It makes me think more about that I wouldn’t maybe otherwise think about. Certainly it educates me more.”*

Pointing to her own experience, Muir said people don’t have to know a lot about theater to enjoy the CATF. Overlooking such thought-provoking stimulation the summer festival provides is a big opportunity missed.

“If you are in this area, it’s something to be proud of and it’s something to take advantage of,” she said. *“It’s right in your back yard. I don’t think enough people take advantage of that.”*