Hostel behavior

Shepherdstown theater festival offers teens exhilarating hands-on experience

By BETH BATDORF
Special to the Spirit

SHEPHERDSTOWN — The Contemporary American Theater Festival offers an amazing opportunity for young people to have a hands-on experience alongside some of the greatest talents working in contemporary drama today.

Teens 14 to 18 can sign up now for Hostel Youth! — a three-day immersion program returning for its fifth year with “33 exhilarating hours” of readings, workshops, performances and opportunities to learn from an array of talent featured in the CATF company.

Hostel Youth! is the brainchild of Peggy McKown, the festival’s associate producing director. She says she shares credit with Julian Lazarus, the director of education at New Spire Arts, a performing arts nonprofit in Frederick, Md.

McKown is passionate about the program, based on a full-immersion youth hosted model. She wants parents, teachers and other people who are interested in supporting young people to know that Hostel Youth! is not a typical theater camp — and not just for young people who want to be actors or designers or playwrights or somehow involved with the theater.

“The goal is to help our youth connect with the art of theater so that it can be part of their lives forever,” she said. “The goal is to help our youth develop social skills so they can talk to their peers about important things. The goal is to make better human beings.”

Theresa M. Davis, the director of Hostel Youth!, has served in that position for four years. CATF patrons may remember her from her work directing last summer’s CATF stage reading of “Turn Me Loose: The Unhinging of Medgar Evers” by Frank X. Walker.

Expects Davis: “I believe we are helping to build a culture of empathy, creating a safe — yet, not always comfortable — space that allows the ‘Hostellers’ to speak about the plays and their lives in profound and meaningful ways. In the three days we’re together the students become a community of empowered and committed theatre participants. It’s such a joy to hear and see them respond intellectually.”

WANT TO KNOW MORE? Watch the Hostel Youth! video at catf.org to get an overview of the program, then download a registration form at catf.org/HostelYouth. The deadline to sign up comes July 3

(See HOSTEL Page B7)
Hostel
FROM PAGE B3

Ed Herendeen

see them respond intellectually and viscerally to the power of live performance. I hope each Hostel Youth! experience sparks a love and respect for theatre that will last a lifetime.”

The CATF plays are professionally produced so the students have the opportunity to interact with professionals from the Actors’ Equity Association, United Scenic Artists and the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. Hostel Youth! participants will see five plays with an optional sixth show available plus a new play reading, talkbacks, an acting and directing workshop with CATF founder Ed Herendeen, movement workshops, and a host of other activities.

Herendeen calls it “a real pleasure” to see how young people respond to the plays. “They really get it,” he said. “They are willing and open.”

And participants in the program are given a life time pass to all the CATF plays in the future, which is a wonderful perk.

McKown is open to talking to parents who might have some concerns about the language or the themes of the plays. Parents are even invited to see a show with their son or daughter. Some of the students who return for a second summer are designated as leaders and provide peer support for the new attendees.

Take a few minutes and watch the Hostel Youth! video which is on CATF’s website (catf.org) to get an overview of the program. You will be amazed at the comments from the participants. Here’s a sampling:

“The plays have been so thought provoking, mind-stimulating. With new works come new ideas. Even if it is a play, it actually happens. It’s really gripping like a movie but you feel closer to it. The playwright who worked with us asked us to wake up every morning and ask who we are and what we want. What is your purpose in life?”

“My dad signed me up for it and I was really nervous. Just meeting new people is anxiety producing for me and being told I’m confident was the best compliment ever.”

“I thought it was mind-blowing as the plays would go from ridiculously serious to hilarious in a second.”

“I’ve been so grateful for this experience. It’s been so eye-opening. I love the concepts that are being demonstrated and the philosophies that are being explored. You are never finished learning and there is always something else that someone can teach you.”

Alex Romine, a freshman at St. James School in Hagerstown, Md., took part in Hostel Youth! last summer and says it was the perfect place to learn new things about the theater, both the acting, and what happens behind the scenes.

“For example, I learned how people set up the stage, some good warm ups for acting, and how the costumes are made. My personal favorite thing was learning how to perform a fight scene,” he said.

You may remember Sam Shunney, who played 11-year-old Robbie Wilson in “The Full Catastrophe” in 2015. Sam attended Hostel Youth! in 2015 and called it “the perfect platform that allowed me to engage in creative theater activities while bonding with a genuinely wonderful group of people.” He’s a sophomore at Jefferson High.

I look forward to interacting with the Hostel Youth! kids every season. I hope my character, self-confidence, empathy and fun-loving spirit will develop in parallel to their wide-eyed energy and enthusiasm. I think I might lie about my age this year and sneak in a registration form for Hostel Youth!, but don’t tell Ed!

– Beth K. Baidorf
serves on the board of the
Contemporary American Theater Festival