

Theater festival celebrates 25 years of new plays

SHEPHERDSTOWN — A feminist punk rock protest group called Pussy Riot made headlines in the past few years after staging a protest against Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Three of the members were arrested and released from prison just before the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.

So when Ed Herendeen, the founder and producing director of the Contemporary American Theater Festival (CATF) in Shepherdstown, had \$10,000 to commission a play for the upcoming event, which will be held from July 10 to Aug. 2 at Shepherd University, he interviewed several playwrights, including Barbara Hammond.

“She said, ‘I want to write about the three women in Pussy Riot who were arrested and tried, and tell their story,’” Herendeen said during a telephone interview. “‘It’s a play about human rights, women’s rights, artistic freedom and censorship.’”

“And I said, ‘I love that idea,’ and I gave her the money to write ‘We Are Pussy Riot.’”

The play will be one of four world premieres at the CATF, and in keeping with the festival’s mission, it obviously deals with recent and relevant topics, so much so that Hammond told Herendeen that “she has a story that hasn’t got an ending yet,” because events continue to evolve.

“It seems to be one of the plays that people are excited talking about because of the attention the women have received,” Herendeen said. “So I think it’s generating interest.”

Founded in 1991, the festival will celebrate its 25th year, and Herendeen noted how much the CATF has grown in those years — from a \$90,000 budget to just over \$2 million, from two plays a festival to five, and with visitors coming from 37 states and foreign countries to see plays.

However, Herendeen prefers to look forward to a five-year plan that ideally would up the number of plays to six, as well as create opportunities to visit other theater festivals around the world.

In the meantime, he noted that attending the CATF is an “immersive” experience that allows a theatergoer to see all five plays in two days, plus attend other events, such as lectures, breakfasts with Herendeen and lunch with the artists.

“And we do late-night salons in different pubs in Shepherdstown, so there is all this opportunity,” he added. “People are staying in hotels and going to restaurants and talking about what they just saw, and we’ve captured some of that by allowing the conversation to take place in an immersion experience.”

The five plays take place in three venues, the 400-seat Frank Center, the two-year-old 200-seat Marinoff Theater and the 99-seat “intimate” Studio 112.

In addition to “We Are Pussy Riot,” the other three world premiere plays include:

“World Builders,” by Johnna Adams, about two mental health patients with schizophrenia who prefer their fantasy worlds to the real one;

“On Clover Road,” by Steven Dietz, about a mother who hires a private investigator to extract her daughter from a cult;

“The Full Catastrophe,” by Michael Weller, about a marriage counselor who moves in with a couple to provide guidance.

The one second production at this year’s CATF will be “Everything You Touch,” by Sheila Callaghan, described as a “fierce, lushly written dark comedy that exposes the struggle to find an identity that is more than skin deep,” taking place in the fashion world. It premiered Off-Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theater in New York City this past February.

“These are American writers who are listening to America and telling America’s stories,” Herendeen said. “They have their ear to the ground, and they are listening to the American landscape.”

For more information, call (800) 999-2283 or www.catf.org

Lifestyles editor Mary Wade Burnside can be reached at (304) 626-1438 or by email at mwburnside@theet.com