

'Time for new blood': CATF founder to retire in December

SHEPHERDSTOWN — More than 30 years after the fact, Ed Herendeen can still recall the moment he knew Shepherdstown would be the perfect place to build something like the Contemporary American Theater Festival.

He was visiting the town with his wife, Sue, and they were sitting on a bench in front of the Frank Center on Shepherd University's campus. The Blue Ridge Mountains were in the distance, and the picturesque landscape that spread out in front of them spoke volumes without making a noise.

"We were just staring into an empty field, and my wife said, 'Wouldn't it be great to grow old in this town?'" Herendeen reflected in an interview Tuesday. "And that's what did it for me, that's what did it for us."

Now, after three decades building one of the most respected theater festivals in the country, Herendeen will have a little extra time on his hands to grow old — if he so chooses — as the founder and producing director of CATF is retiring from his role with the festival. His decision will go into effect in December, half a year before the 2020 season — a season about which Herendeen is furiously passionate — will kick off on the campus of Shepherd two years after it was initially

planned to go into production.

Those plans changed when the COVID-19 pandemic began in March of 2020. It was at that time when Herendeen was in New York City casting the six plays that would make up the 2020 season. He was halfway through the first week of casting when the New York theater scene went dark, and Herendeen was forced to return home.

The postponement of the 2020 season — and the subsequent 18 months during which Herendeen and his team worked from home — allowed the 68-year-old to reflect on what would be best for himself, his family and the organization he founded as it grows into its next chapter. As a result, he said he felt that now was the best time to step aside, as a transitioning committee decides what the future holds for the festival's leadership.

"I'd go back and forth with myself," Herendeen explained. "So, finally, I said I'd make a decision in August. I thought I would take the month to look at my life, career, finances, talk with my wife and kids and figure out, at 68, what's best for everybody, and it really settled with me that this would be the year to retire in December.

"This gives the festival an incredible opportunity to investigate a new leadership model and to look at what will really improve the theater festival," he added. "In addition to

that, we have a balanced budget. So, I turned it over at a time when the festival is extremely stable. It's got a good foundation, and it's now time for innovative, new blood to make it better than it is."

According to Herendeen, his personal response to the decision has surprised him a bit, as he thought he'd be more emotional about the departure. Instead, he noted how he's been able to focus on the positive as he readies for his life's next chapter.

"To look back on all the work we've done, I'm going out on a personal high," he said. "I feel really great that this festival was never a one-person entity. I've had the good fortune that since 1991, I've worked with top artists from across the country. As the staff grew, the festival grew, and we grew an audience. That was not me, that was all of us together. It was the work that got us to this success."

Since beginning CATF in 1991, Herendeen has overseen the production of more than 130 plays, including more than 55 world premieres. The festival, which typically runs through the bulk of July, spotlights six plays over four weeks and attracts visitors from across the world. While CATF took home the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts in 1999, Herendeen received the Fine Arts Distinguished Alumni Award in Theater from Ohio University, and he has served on the board of the Theatre Communications Group,

which is the national service organization for American theaters.

Yet, despite all the accolades Herendeen has received through the years, the thing he said he's most proud of was producing the new work that the festival staged throughout his tenure. "My Name Is Rachel Corrie," a play about a young college student that was killed by an Israeli tank, was one that Herendeen said will continue to stick with him, even in retirement.

"It's a beautiful and sad story," he said. "I remember that for the issues it raised. That play will always be in my mind, because we had the courage to do the play when it was pulled from New York City. When I heard about that, I requested the rights. Some of the most memorable moments came from some of the work that's been controversial."

As for what's next for CATF, Herendeen said he'll be around to help answer any questions the festival's board might have, but he's also very cognizant of staying away while the committee and consultants decide what to do next when it comes to leadership. He might take in a play or two at next summer's festival, but he might wear a disguise, he said jokingly.

When it comes to Herendeen, the person, however, things

appear to be a bit more simple. He said he's looking forward to being a private citizen and perhaps doing some traveling. Because of when the festival occurs during a calendar year, he hasn't been able to take a vacation in June or July in more than three decades, so he noted how he might try to get away during a time that's not hurricane season for once.

In all, though, Herendeen has no regrets for taking the leap, moving to West Virginia and beginning CATF. It could have been done anywhere, he said, but West Virginia and Shepherdstown proved to be the perfect fit.

"When I said yes to coming here, and I said I want to do contemporary theater and find a home for new work, there was an intuitive feeling that the stars were aligning, and this was the right idea at the right time, both in American Theater and in the Eastern Panhandle," he said. "It was the right idea, the right time. I knew that when I saw the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Potomac River — I was very awe-struck by what was before me.

"There was something intuitively that said, 'Yes, this is going to happen, and I don't know where it's going to go, but I think it's going to be big, I think it's going to be important, and I think it's going to be necessary,'" he added.

"My feeling," Herendeen concluded with reflection, "was that something was happening here."

