

Behind the Scenes with CATF 2019

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CATF Founder Ed Herendeen explaining how a play meticulously comes to life when no one is looking. ©Observer

Entering its 28th year, Shepherdstown's renowned [Contemporary American Theater Festival](#) (CATF) runs from July 5-28 and comprises six new plays by American playwrights—spotlighting contemporary issues that both challenge and entertain audiences.

This year's titles include: [My Lord, What a Night](#); [Wrecked](#); [Chester Bailey](#); [Support Group for Men](#); [A Welcome Guest](#); and [Antonio's Song](#).

A behind-the-scenes tour of all-things CATF with Founder Ed Herendeen only confirms that he's as dialed in and enthusiastic about theater as he's ever been. A running (and fascinating) commentary covers the festival's every detail—examining workrooms, practice studios, sets under construction, costume and prop design, and audio/visual boards ... discussing script development, directorial concepting, actors, furniture restoration, and interns arriving from all over the country. You learn eventually that somewhere around 150 people will be employed by CATF this summer, and Herendeen seems to know all of them—including bits of their stories.



Herendeen examines progress in Shepherd University's Frank Center just weeks before CATF kicks off.

Something most folks don't get to see is what happens in the month leading up to CATF—a proverbial beehive of activity that mesmerizingly goes from nothing to six plays and their customized sets (and the countless details therein) within five weeks.

"In another week, this transforms into a theater, but until then, it's the rehearsal space for *My Lord, What a Night*, and *Support Group for Men* (both at the Frank Center)," Herendeen said during the tour. "We rehearse on tape [literally tape on the floor], so different colored tape represents a different set."

Covering the walls of this particular space is a tapestry of blueprints, photos of period clothes and furniture, CAD renderings, and more. "One great part

about computer design is that you can choose a seat in the audience and create the view from there to the stage," added Herendeen, pointing to the many different computerized images on the wall representing the set for *My Lord, What a Night*.

"Everything you see here on the walls is sort of a peek behind the curtain at all the research and study that goes into a play—in this case, *My Lord*," noted Herendeen—as workers brought the set to life behind us.



Rarely does a detail go unnoticed or a CATF worker go unacknowledged with Herendeen.

Carrying It With Them

Though his selection process doesn't change much year after year, Herendeen still reads around 100 scripts leading up to his selection of six plays by year's end. "As people might have noticed over the last several

years, I've become attracted to contemporary plays written about a historical period," he said. "There's something about a way that we look at history that can shed light—I'm fascinated by how we as a society, a country, a world, a community repeat history. Why do we do that?"

As far as what connects 2019's six plays? "I find that they talk to each other," he emphasized. "Plays are not meant to hang on walls in a museum, so contemporary theater is a rehearsal of the concerns of the present moment. New plays, whether they go back in history or not, are still all about now. I'm interested in doing work that reflects where we are, back to ourselves."



Herendeen discusses audio/visual progress with a CATF tech expert.

"Now, I can't help but read the script and not also start seeing all *this* [design, construction, layout, blueprints, costume, props], but the

wonderful thing about theater is that you then get a chance to put it in someone else's head—the collaboration with other designers, directors, actors—and, ultimately, you get to put it in the heads of the audience. And though all of this vanishes at the end of July, it's taken around the country and the world by them. They carry it with them. They extend the conversations. They cultivate the ideas. And that's why theater is so important."

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