



BEHIND THE SCENES

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BY MELISSA AUMAN GREINER



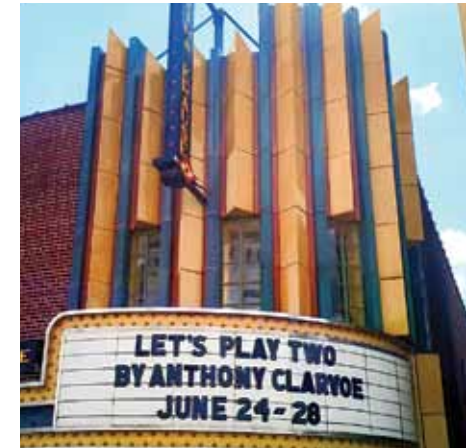
◀ TAKE THE STAGE: From left, a dance from BTE's play "Incorruptible"; a scene from "You Can't Take It With You."

THE COMMUNITY'S THEATER

How one town and one company are defying traditional theater

They have transformed the personal stories of their town's triumphs and tragedies into dramatic productions. They have turned vacant retail space and a teenage dance club into unconventional stages. And with each season, the Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble has become a little more ingrained in the fabric of this small but supportive community.

The Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble (BTE), now in its 32nd year, is a fairly unusual enterprise. On the surface the Susquehanna River Valley group looks like any other community theater company,



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BTE has taken the opportunity to not only produce unusual plays, but produce them in unusual settings.



▲ PLAYING THE PART: Clockwise from above: a scene from "Leading Ladies"; the exterior of the Alvin Krause Theatre; "A Midsummer Night's Dream."



"Incorruptible": Stafford Smith; "You Can't Take It With You": Earl Naugle; "Leading Ladies": Christina Krumm; "A Midsummer Night's Dream": Stafford Smith

but a look at its lineup or background on its cast members tells another story. Many theaters welcome actors to audition for each production, but nearly all BTE shows are comprised of eight full-time actors, many of whom have worked together for decades. While many theaters rely on big name shows pulled from Broadway, BTE turns to unknown playwrights, even penning a few of the shows themselves. And, especially in today's economy, when the bottom line is what shapes a theater's mission, the non-equity group instead turns its focus to the local community.

The beauty of the relationship stems from the ensemble members themselves being part of the community. They are Cub Scout pack leaders, YMCA members and community churchgoers. "Everyone has their normal, everyday connections," says Gerard Stropnicky, current producing ensemble director and a founding member of the group. "And our mission here is

being directly connected to our community."

"Eight full-time, world-class actors working together for decades is a very rare jewel," he adds.

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piece produced in 1996 called "Letters to the Editor" took letters from 100 years of local papers and turned them into a commentary on the town and its people. In 2004 "Gravity Hill" surprised and stunned with a look at the area's teen culture. Held in a dance club and a vacant mall space with a garage band as musical accompaniment, the play showcased interviews with local high school students about drug and alcohol use, stress and growing up.

Another Bloomsburg-centric production developed out of the massive flooding that ravaged the region in 2006. With the town drying itself out of \$100 million in damages, church groups, families and perfect

Theater Review

Check out these other theater companies that aren't afraid to think outside the (black) box:

City Theatre
Pittsburgh
citytheatrecompany.org
412.431.CITY (2489)
City Theatre focuses on new plays and playwrights, commissioning pieces with an adventurous spirit.

Electric Theatre Company
Scranton
electrictheatre.org
570.558.1515
Dedicated to both stimulating the mind with thought-provoking productions and helping revitalize downtown Scranton, this theater company tries to work area writers, actors and topics into its schedule.

Gamut Theatre Group
Harrisburg
gamutplays.org
717.238.4111
This ensemble group focuses on retelling classics in modern ways in their intimate show space.

InterAct Theatre Company
Philadelphia
interacttheatre.org
215.568.8079
This company focuses on new works that promote their mission to educate audiences and spur social change.

Stage Right!
Greensburg
stagerightgreensburg.com
724.832.7464
Originally a school for performing arts, Stage Right! branched out to create a professional theater group, helping enhance its mission of investing in local talent and educating through example.



▲ **SHOW OFF:** Clockwise from above left: two performances at The City Theatre in Pittsburgh; a scene from Philadelphia's InterAct Theatre Company.

strangers banded together to rebuild. In the aftermath, the ensemble began talking to residents about their experiences and building what has become "Flood Stories," premiered in August in Bloomsburg Town Park.

BTE has taken the opportunity to not only produce unusual plays, but produce them in unusual settings. In 2006 a big-box retailer at a local mall left behind a large, vacant space. BTE used the dormant space for a twist on the children's favorite "Paddington Bear." "One scene would happen in one section, and then the audience – the children, their parents – would march somewhere else and Paddington would lead them," says Mark McDonald, president of the ensemble's

board of trustees. "It was a unique and innovative way of engaging a young audience."

In turn for the town's support, they have tried to have the community help in the play selection process. When they are contemplating a piece, they may hold stage readings or focus groups to get feedback.

The result is a very special relationship between a town and its theater. The ensemble members live straddled between two worlds. "We are just another neighbor who happens to have a job as a local theater artist," says Stropnick. But a neighbor you can stop in the canned goods aisle to discuss Hamlet or at the mechanic to discuss lighting cues.

MORE >>> Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, 226 Center St., Bloomsburg, bte.org; 800.282.0283

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