

Summer Theatre Round-Up

by Deborah S. McGee

Come, spend an evening—or find daytime delight. Eugene summer theater houses every type of dramatic partner. Whatever your taste, you're sure to find pleasurable the time you spend with Eugene's multicolored performers and their troupes.

1987 outdoor theater season began last weekend at the controversial intersection of Broadway and Willamette. With the audience seated adjacent to center fountain, Mainstage Theater/Eugene Downtown opened *Brigadoon*, the first of their summer repertory offerings; *A Funny Thing Happened On the Way To the Forum* opens there this weekend. Both plays promise that marvelous experience of theater canopied with nothing but dusk-to-stars nighttime.

This same theatrical circle brought us *Oliver* and *The Fantastiks* last summer, same place. This year's big news is an improvement in acoustics, due to switching audience/stage places. Players now have a permanent, sound-catching wall behind them. When mingling with theatergoers at intermission Saturday, I saw mellow faces and a mad rush to Prince Puckler's. Where did the espresso stand go? Hawaiian shaved ice was still there.

Brigadoon's principal romantic leads reportedly show a definite spark of love among them. Wonderful Kenny Kienzie is in the cast, at 78 their eldest. Kienzie, a retired South Eugene High math teacher, starred in last summer's *Taking My Turn*. Liz Folger also from that cast plays a sword dancer here—that I gotta see. Many's the tune you'll remember from this highland romantic tale, most likely "Come To Me, Bend To Me," "The Heather On the Hill," and "Almost Like Being In Love." Jim Roberts has stepped suitably into the musical direction role for this production, heading a 20-piece orchestra.

One night recently I looked on as Sherie Blankenship, *Brigadoon*'s choreographer, put through their paces a bevy of young women, the highland lassies of the play. Do other theater lovers know the evening pleasure of strolling around the mall, checking out the theater sections of bookstores, and catching snippets of Mainstage rehearsals? You can watch theater in process, ending up more aware of how much work goes into such artistic productions.

A Funny Thing... is a lighthearted Stephen Sondheim musical comedy. Springtime in ancient Rome backdrops this tale of a cunning slave, Pseudolus, a role on-Broadway for which Zero Mostel catapulted higher in fame. A hero and heroine of mock-classic proportions also are in the play, which is topped off with ample forays into vaudeville and burlesque. Brett Bigham, emigre from New Jersey a year and a half ago, plays Pseudolus. Don Scorby is in it, of Snafu and Cascade Balzac Company, back in Eugene after last summer's stint in Ashland. Steve Reddy is another one to look for, the person who played the American soldier in Beirut in *Rap Master Ronnie*.

If your drama desires pull you to entertainment on a grander scale, you'll be at the fabulous Silva Concert Hall of the Hult Center for the Performing Arts, for one of 15 full productions of *1776*. Producing director/local celeb Ed Ragozzino calls it "the best musical ever written." The subject is the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The Eugene Festival of Musical Theater is behind this production, those folks who gave us last summer's dazzling, Broadway-rivalling *Guys and Dolls*.

At the July 24 opening of *1776*, Oregon governor Neil Goldschmidt

will give a brief curtain speech. An opening night semi-formal gala will follow the play, with dancing, a midnight supper, and a no-host bar, at the Conference Center, Eugene Hilton, at \$15 per person.

In smaller quarters at the Soreng Theater, also of the magnificent Hult Center, serious musical theater buffs and popular culture aficionados wanting a more current breath of East Coast, still-the-hub theatrical air, will look forward to *Leader of the Pack*. Mainstage Cabaret/Jim Roberts Productions will be in plush Hult Center accommodations for the first time, following a string of highly successful musical theater productions at Seymour's Greenery.

Based on the life, times and music of the woman who wrote the lyrics to that famed 60's single of the play's name, *Leader* stirs my blood more than anything else in local theater in sight. Eugene summer theater will be enjoyable, entertaining, and emotionally satisfying. I predict *Leader* will give the peak moments of all those characteristics.

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And Now, A Word From the Punks...

Three strong rumbles from other local theater groups could prove totally satisfying. In addition to the first of Mainstage Cabaret getting a toe in the door at the Hult, University Theater, Very Little Theater and an independent production company have attempted other firsts—boldly exposing themselves to new ventures.

The University of Oregon Theater Department is doing August Strindberg's *Lucky Per's Journey*, with an interesting daily double format: morning performances for children, followed each evening by an adult version. Strindberg's original script of his fantasy play forms the basic plot the kids will see. At night, mature audiences will hear an expanded version "with updated satirical references to local and national institutions," according to Norma Wetzell, director, costumer and UO Theater candidate for the Ph.D. It's not every year the University does summerstock. Let's hope it's a habit.

Very Little Theater is uncovering new vistas with a children's theater production. Basically a community theater troupe, its members have made both an intriguing and daring choice: *The Boy Who Stole the Stars*. It has comic moments, and is not too heavy, but the topic of the play, terminal disease, is serious. *The Boy Who Stole the Stars*, *Brigadoon*, and matinees of *Lucky Per's Journey* are probably best choices for parents who want their offspring to have positive theater experiences. Depending on their tastes and ages, though, some also may enjoy *1776* and *A Funny thing...*

Mallomar Productions will stage *Graceland* at New Zone Gallery, in near-synchronicity with the 10-year commemorative service to be held at Graceland, Elvis Presley's Memphis mansion. I can't wait to see it with D.

Roberts (in last summer's renegade theater winner *Laundry and Bourbon*) and Heather Copeland, that outrageous baton twirler you won't have forgotten from University Theater's *Talking With*. It's about two women who at first compete, then cooperate, on the matter of who will be first to enter the memorial. Terra Nova Theater staged Dorothy Velasco's *Miracle At Graceland* a year and a half ago. A question I want to ponder is the synchronicity in our community of the two different plays. Opening night July 23 is a preview/benefit for Shanti in Oregon, an AIDS/ARC support group. Curtain time is 8 pm, with a 7:30 pm Elvis radio tribute.

A Need For Brussels Sprouts most likely will not be staged until later, in spite of those tantalizing posters around town. Razz Berry said Berry/Lane Productions is re-forming, and postponing the mounting of this curiously titled production. Watch for it.

Party Time

This year there will be another evening celebration of musical theater, on Saturday, August 1, in the space between the Hult Center and the Eugene Hilton. Cast and crew members of *1776*, *Leader Of the Pack*, *Brigadoon* and *A Funny Thing...* and those in the background of Eugene's musical theater scene will be milling around those of us there looking for another evening thrill. There will be wine and entertainment and lots of peripherals available at nearby hubs (Leah's, the new BJ's now where the Bon-Sai was, the Big H, Original Joe's, Sixth Street Grill, and farther afield). Admission to party is free. The scene will be at least worth a stop-by on your Saturday night on-the-town wanderings.

More specific details follow. Dates indicate the run of the play, but performances are not every night. See *What's Happening's* calendar or the Lane Regional Arts Council Calendar for more information.

The Boy Who Stole the Stars

At 7 pm at Very Little Theater, 24th & Hilyard, July 17-August 2. A boy spending vacation as usual with his grandfather learns the old man is dying. \$3. 344-7751, 686-4000, 344-3934.

Brigadoon

Mainstage Theater/Eugene Downtown. At 8:30 pm at central fountain, outdoors downtown, July 10-August 8. Romantic musical set in 18th century Scotland, with two 20th century visitors. \$4-6 tickets at The Bon, Literary Lion, at 45 W. Broadway or by mail or phone from Mainstage, P.O. Box 11732, Eugene 97440, phone 686-4368.

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The Boy Who Stole the Stars stars Ben Taitel as "Grandpa" and Mathew Smiley of Fern Ridge as "Mathew." This Very Little Theatre production opens July 17.

A Funny Thing Happened On the Way To the Forum

Mainstage Theater/Eugene Downtown. At 8:30 pm at central fountain, outdoors downtown, July 16-August 9. Comedy about a Roman slave conning his way into freedom. Same ticket info as *Brigadoon* above.

Graceland

Mallomar Productions. At 7:30 pm, Elvis radio tribute, with 8 pm curtain time, at New Zone Gallery, 411 High Street, July 24-August 8. Nostalgic comedy-drama about two women in competition for first-come position at an Elvis Presley memorial. \$4 at the door or at Backstage Dance-wear. 683-6866, 345-7152.

Leader of the Pack

Mainstage Cabaret/Jim Roberts productions. At 7:30 pm in Soreng Theater, Hult Center, July 31-August 9. Sixties music, a West Coast premiere, with lyrics by Ellie Greenwich of title song, "Da Doo Ron Ron," and "Chapel Of Love" fame. \$8.50-\$9.50

tickets at Hult Center outlets or at 45 W. Broadway. 686-4368, 687-5000.

Lucky Per's Journey

University of Oregon Theater Department, in Robinson Theater July 31-August 8. Matinees at 11 am for children, evening adult-oriented, plus-politics performances at 8 pm. Fantasy play by Swedish playwright August Strindberg (*Miss Julie*). \$2.50 general, \$1.50 children under 12, tickets at box office in Villard Hall, UO campus. Hours noon-4 pm Mondays-Saturdays, 10 am-8:30 pm performance dates. 686-4191.

1776

Eugene Festival of Musical Theater. At 8 pm in Silva Concert Hall, Hult Center, July 24-August 15. Full production, large-scale musical with a humorous look at the men and times when the Declaration of Independence evolved. Ed Ragozzino is production director (read dazzle). \$6-\$16 tickets at Hult box office. 345-0028, 687-5000.

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