

# Returning to the stage, finally

Local productions, theaters returning to sense of normalcy after two-year hiatus

By JENNIFER COLTON  
For EO Media Group

PENDLETON — When “The Sound of Music” closed on March 1, 2020, Pendleton’s College Community Theater expected to open its next production in six weeks. Instead, rehearsals at the Bob Clapp Theatre would be canceled for two years.

“Little Women: The Broadway Musical,” the first Pendleton-based theater production since the coronavirus pandemic, runs the next two weekends, Feb. 24-26 and March 3-5, in the theater on the campus of Blue Mountain Community College.

“When COVID hit, it was really scary because nobody knew what to expect,” said Margaret Mayer, president of the CCT board of directors. “We had no idea it would be two years, no one knew. Here we are.”

Almost exactly two years later (“Sound of Music” opened Feb. 20, 2020; “Little Women” opens Feb. 24, 2022), Mayer was back in the theater as music director for “Little Women.” Caitlin Marshall is directing.

“The last two years have been really stressful. People need something that can take their minds off everything,” Marshall said. “I really just feel it’s important to keep some kind of normalcy with all the chaos going on.”

That idea of normalcy has prompted shows to come back this month in Hermiston and La Grande, even with COVID-19 impacts. At Hermiston High School, Jordan Bemrose brought together 70 students for performances of “Beauty and the Beast.”

“The biggest reason we wanted to jump back into live theater is mostly to give these fantastic students something exciting to look forward to,” she said.

Bemrose added the performing arts students are



Eastern Oregon University students rehearse “We’ve Got Your Number” on Jan. 26, 2022. After a delay due to COVID-19 cases among the cast, performances are set for Feb. 25 and 26 at McKenzie Theatre in La Grande.

Alex Wittwer/EO Media Group, File

talented and hardworking and need opportunities to shine.

“With online school, we missed out on so many performance opportunities that now, being back in person, we wanted to make up for that loss of time,” she said. “For many students, singing, acting and playing their musical instruments is their whole life and inspiration and what they aspire to do as careers after high school.”

With the lingering impacts of COVID-19, the Hermiston production required masks to rehearse on stage and careful tracking to avoid quarantine that could cancel rehearsals — or performances. That same fear became a reality this month for Eastern Oregon University’s “We’ve Got Your Number,” a choreographed choral performance. Several students tested positive for COVID-19, and the show was postponed two weeks to Feb. 25 and 26. That delay pushed “A Gentleman’s Guide to Love and Murder,” a stage musical planned to open March 10, into EOU’s fall term.

“It’s exciting to be back and yet it’s frustrating at the same time. The biggest problem with bringing theater back is COVID is still doing everything it can to prevent it from coming back,” said Ken Wheeler, associate professor of theater at EOU. “As much as

things are getting better and we’re seeing the sun at the end of the storm, it’s still affecting it.”

For tickets to “We’ve Got Your Number,” visit [www.eou.edu/music](http://www.eou.edu/music).

Returning to the stage during a pandemic requires flexibility and creativity.

When the pandemic hit, the Elgin Opera House’s spring 2020 production of “Matilda” was only weeks away from opening. Instead of opening that March, the show was postponed for a year and a half.

In between, the Opera House tried outdoor productions as well as a fully recorded production of “High School Musical Jr.” During this musical, rehearsed in the winter of 2021, actors were split into cohort groups that rehearsed and recorded on different days with no live audience.

“When we announced we were recording ‘High School Musical,’ we thought we’d get just a few people audition,” said Terry Hale, Elgin Opera House executive artistic director. “We had 70 or 80 kids from five different counties. That’s how important this is.”

Hermiston High School also saw large participation numbers with “Beauty and the Beast,” a show they’ve been rehearsing since the middle of November.

“I wish people knew how hard these students work and how much time,

effort and talent are needed to put a full show together,” Bemrose said. “It takes weeks to learn lines, music, choreography, organize props and set, and get all of the moving pieces together, including the orchestra, who rehearse separately and join us during our dress rehearsal week. We rehearse at least two hours after school during our production months, and dress rehearsal week we rehearse after school four to five hours finalizing everything.”

Those hundreds of hours do not include the extra pandemic struggle of rehearsing with masks or returning to the stage after a two-year hiatus.

“Everyone is out of practice with the process, but we’ll work at overcoming those handicaps just so we can put the show on,” Wheeler said. “There’s nothing that beats a live shared experience in a darkened theater. That communication between the actors and the audience, there’s nothing that compares to that. We’re striving to get back to that as soon as possible even if we have to take strange precautions to be able to do it. It’s worth it.”

In Baker City, Eastern Oregon Regional Theatre has presented a few shows — the children’s theater presented “Jungle Book” in the fall of 2021, and “Pride@Prejudice” wrapped up a two-weekend



Jennifer Colton/Contributed Photo

Karen Taylor, left, and Carly Elder rehearse for “Little Women: The Broadway Musical” on Feb. 7, 2022. The Blue Mountain Community College and Friends of the Elgin Opera House joint production goes on Feb. 24-26 and March 3-5 at the Bob Clapp Theatre in Pendleton.

run Feb. 20.

“Because theater is known as collaborative art, it was one of the few art forms almost totally shut down during the pandemic,” said Abby Dennis, EORT artistic director. “Since our art form requires being around others, theater people were completely cut off from being able to work through the overwhelming emotions from the past two years.”

Bemrose said seeing a show come together is the greatest reward of theater, along with how accomplished the cast and crew feel. Hale said it is the way the performing arts bring joy and life to those on and off the stage.

“As a society, we focused so much on being afraid of death (in the pandemic) that we stopped doing the things that brought us joy, the things that made us alive,” Hale said. “One of the best

ways to celebrate life is through the arts. If people keep coming out, we’ll keep doing it.”

Dennis said returning to the stage is “bittersweet.”

“I love being able to entertain my community, but it hurts to think of everything we’ve lost over the past two years,” she said.

EORT’s 2022 schedule includes “Women Playing Hamlet,” “God of Carnage,” and the children’s theater will present “The Enchanted Bookshop” and “Macbeth.”

In Pendleton, tickets are still available for “Little Women” for both weekends, Feb. 24-26 and March 3-5. For information, go to [www.elginoperahouse.com](http://www.elginoperahouse.com).

“It’s going to be an amazing show,” Marshall said. “Come fall in love with these sisters and have a great night of theater again — finally.”

## PUBLIC SAFETY REPORT

### FRIDAY, FEB. 18

8:57 a.m. — La Grande police responded to the 400 block of 12th street on a report of a subject acting disorderly. The person voluntarily went to Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande.

3:16 p.m. — La Grande police responded to the 1300 block of M Avenue on a report of harassment. An officer made contact and explained options for restraining orders.

4:38 p.m. — A caller reported an assault at a residence on the 2100 block of O Avenue, La Grande. An officer made contact, took a report and referred the matter to detectives.

5:39 p.m. — The Union County Sheriff’s Office received a report of animal cruelty on Palmer Junction Road, Elgin. An animal enforcement officer made contact and will follow up.

6:48 p.m. — Police responded to a disturbance at a residence at Tamarack Court Apartments, 1613 21st St., La Grande. The parties separated and agreed to be civil with each other.

### SATURDAY, FEB. 19

7:29 a.m. — A caller reported a transient was in the doorway at the Texaco station at 2614 Island Ave., La Grande. An officer responded and trespassed one person.

9:22 a.m. — A caller on the 2000 block of Fourth Street, La Grande, reported a dog bit a person. An animal enforcement officer responded.

10:14 a.m. — La Grande police responded to C Avenue and Second Street on a report of a two-vehicle collision and took a report.

4:04 p.m. — La Grande police responded to a report of a civil disturbance involving someone experiencing mental or emotional duress. Police contacted the Center for Human Development.

8:28 p.m. — A resident on the 10100 block of West Fourth Street, La Grande, reported footprints near a residence. A Union County sheriff’s deputy will provide an extra patrol.

10:07 p.m. — The Union County Sheriff’s Office received a report of a dog bite victim at Grande Ronde Hospital, 900 Sunset Drive, La Grande. A deputy responded and took a report.

10:44 p.m. — A caller reported livestock on the loose in the area of 70300 Middle Road, Elgin.

### SUNDAY, FEB. 20

1:42 a.m. — La Grande police responded to Orchard Motel, 2206 Adams Ave., on a report of an assault. An officer cited a 70-year-old man for harassment.

4:04 p.m. — A caller reported a vehicle theft at Les Schwab Tire Center, 2306 Adams Ave., La Grande. An officer made contact and explained options.

6:43 p.m. — A caller reported the theft of a vehicle on the 59000 block of Foothill Road, La Grande. A Union County sheriff’s deputy responded and cited Ian Fraser Brooks, 25, for unauthorized entry of and unauthorized use of a vehicle.

10:13 p.m. — A resident on the 3000 block of Birch Street, La Grande, reported someone shaking their door earlier this morning. An officer made contact and will provide an extra patrol.

10:59 p.m. — Union County Sheriff’s Office arrested Waldo Leiva Monteagudo, 43, for driving under the influence of intoxicants (drugs), reckless driving and possession of methamphetamine.

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### Stephen ‘Steve’ Craig Hamblin

September 4, 1948 - February 15, 2022

Stephen “Steve” Craig Hamblin, 73, of Richland, Oregon, formerly of Imbler, Oregon, passed away on Tuesday, Feb. 15, 2022, at his residence. A viewing will be held at Loveland Funeral Chapel on Friday, Feb. 25, 2022, 5-7 p.m. A funeral service will be held at Loveland Funeral Chapel on Saturday, Feb. 26, 2022, at 10 a.m. A graveside service at Summerville Cemetery will immediately follow the funeral. Casual dress is preferred by the family. A potluck will immediately follow the graveside service. Meat and drinks will be provided.

Steve was born on Sept. 4, 1948, in Ogden, Utah, to George and June (Moore) Hamblin. He resided in Utah, Wyoming, Idaho, Washington and Oregon. He graduated from Davis High School in Utah. He served our country while in the United States Army and received the Purple Heart and the Bronze Star Medal for his service. He married Lynda Akker and they later divorced. He later married Cynthia L. Hulse.

Steve was a self-employed rancher and was the superintendent for concrete highway construction. He enjoyed hunting, camping, four-wheeling, traveling and reading. He loved being in the mountains, desert or at the ocean.

Steve is survived by his wife, Cynthia; children, Julie Bouee (Jerry) of Logan, Utah, Jake Hamblin (Amy) of Nibley, Utah, Patty Hamblin-Brown (Christine) of Big Sky, Montana, Mike Hamblin (Haley) of Preston, Idaho, and Megan Gilbert (Chaz) of Nibley, Utah; stepchildren, Christina Hoskin-Grove (Tina) of Missouri, Casey Hoskin (Charity) of Parker, Idaho, and Tyrell Cornelius of Alberton, Montana; brother, Eddie Hamblin of Kaysville, Utah; sisters, Donna, Bloodie of Haysville, Utah, and Marilyn Wilcock of Snowville, Utah; 23 grandchildren; 6 great-grandchildren; and numerous nieces and nephews. He was preceded in death by his parents, George and June Hamblin; sister, Shirley Lee; and brothers, Russell, Robert and Allan.

Online condolences may be made to the family at [www.lovelandfuneralchapel.com](http://www.lovelandfuneralchapel.com).

## UPCOMING LOCAL SERVICES

**Feb. 25 — RUBY WREN:** 1 p.m. graveside service, Weston Cemetery.

**Feb. 25 and Feb. 26 — STEVE HAMBLIN:** Friday, 5-7 p.m. viewing, Loveland Funeral Chapel, La Grande; Saturday 10 a.m. funeral, Loveland Funeral Chapel (casual dress preferred), followed by Summerville Cemetery graveside service and potluck.

**March 5 — DAVID KENNEDY:** noon celebration of life, Elgin Community Center (potluck dishes may be dropped off at the center after 10 a.m.).

**March 11 — GEORGE RUSH:** 10:30 a.m. memorial service, Catherine Creek Community Center, Union.

**March 26 — JUDY HUNT:** 3 p.m. celebration of life, La Grande Seventh-day Adventist Church.

**May 19 — ORVA MURRILL:** 2 p.m. graveside service, Union Victorian Cemetery.

Please follow guidelines regarding face coverings and social distancing at gatherings. Calendar courtesy of Loveland Funeral Chapel, La Grande.

### Ruby Wren

August 20, 1928 - February 3, 2022

Ruby Wren passed away peacefully on Feb. 3, 2022. She was a loving, kind and caring mother her whole life through, even to the end. She was born Ruby Geraldine Nedrow on Aug. 20, 1928 in Enterprise, Oregon, to Lloyd and Hattie Nedrow. She grew up knowing hard work and the value of saving. She married Loren Wren on July 15, 1948. They raised a son, Don, and daughter, Carol. Ruby worked at Lamb Weston for many years and moved to Summerville, Oregon, in 1972 to retire.

I thought for a long time how to describe my mother to everyone and found it best in a poem I wrote for her on Mother’s Day in 2001. She loved this poem.

*Saver Perfection*  
Her house is small, thus so is mine, and is filled with this and that, collected over time.  
Each piece a special memory too precious to dispose.  
Everything from tins & glass & a dusty dried up rose.  
There are magazines & paper bags all neatly folded up.  
Everything is meant to save, even that chipped teacup.  
She is a child of little, saver of lots, always aware of how much, every little thing must cost.  
Born into the great depression, lived through some comfortable years. But in the back of her mind, the loss of all, always a constant fear.  
She will probably go on saving, down to the very last, because it is always the present, the future and her past.  
- written by Carol Ann Key, May 5, 2001

Ruby was preceded in death by her husband, Loren, on Sept. 12, 2018. She is survived by her son, Don Wren, and daughter, Carol Wren Key, and husband, David Key. Granddaughters, Sarah Key Storrs, husband, Jeremy, and great-grandsons, Evan and Trevor; Jennifer Key Cleary, husband, Brandon, and great-grandson, Brayden. Sister, Betty Banister and family.

The family wishes to thank Heart ‘n Home Hospice in La Grande, Oregon, for all their loving care of both Ruby and Loren. The staff at the Grande Ronde Retirement & Assisted Living Facility in La Grande, Oregon, for their care and support. Also, Munselle-Rhodes Funeral Home in Milton-Freewater, Oregon.

Graveside services will be held at the Weston Cemetery in Weston, Oregon, on Friday, Feb. 25, 2022, at 1 p.m. To leave an online condolence visit [www.munsellerhodes.com](http://www.munsellerhodes.com).