

A VINE PERFORMANCE

Theatre West aims to tickle your funny bone with 'A Bad Year for Tomatoes'

Story by GRETCHEN AMMERMAN
Photos by LEWIS SMITH

It's no surprise that the play chosen by first time director Sharon Whitmer is a comedy.

"I like to make people laugh," she said. "In my life I've been a standup comic and a professional clown. Seeing people laugh makes me happy, and there are a lot of laughs in this play."

As a matter of fact rehearsing for "A Bad Year for Tomatoes," which can be seen at Theatre West starting Thursday, Jan. 9 and running until Sunday, Feb. 1, was tough at first because of the funny lines throughout the play.

"I couldn't keep my cast from laughing on stage," Whitmer said. "I had to tell them they were going to need to pull it together if we were ever going to get through the whole play in one night."

Written by Pulitzer Prize winning playwright John Patrick, the play was first produced in 1974 at the latter end of a fruitful career that also included screenwriting.

During WWII, Patrick volunteered for the American Field Service providing medical services in support of the British Army. During the long ship journey back to the U.S. when his service ended, he wrote a play called "The Hasty Heart." A commercial success, it was adapted for the screen in 1949, with Ronald Reagan in the starring role.

In 1946, Patrick won an Academy Award for best writing for his adaptation of "The Strange Love of Martha Ivers."

Though contemporary at the time of its release, "A Bad Year for Tomatoes" is now more of a nostalgia piece, but as Whitmer avows and the shenanigans of the cast attest, the humor in the lines has stood the test of time.

Loosely told, the story follows the upheaval in Beaver Haven, a small New England hamlet, when a famous actress



comes to town.

Though seeking quiet to write her memoirs, Myra Marlowe, played by Alice Luchau, ends up creating chaos when the town residents can't help but butt into her business.

The pesky people of Beaver Haven are made up of Tom Lamont, played by John Jeans, Willa May Wilcox, played by Tricia Chandler, Cora Gump, played by Elizabeth Chandler, "Piney," played by Steve Griffiths, Reba Harper, played by Jana Ringhage and Larry Stevens as the Sheriff. Debbie Rhein is acting as assistant director.

"With every rehearsal it gets funnier as more things get revealed in the character I'm playing," Luchau said. "I wasn't sure at first if I was going to be able to do the role but now I'm glad I am. For reasons that will be revealed in the play, I'm working on different levels which makes it fun to do; it's really hilarious."

Though this is Whitmer's directorial debut, she has been in theater for most of her life.

"In addition to acting I've been an assistant director, hair dresser, set builder; pretty much everything it takes to put on a play I've done it," she said. "I chose a comedy for my first time as director because having been a standup comic I thought I could probably handle comedy. Let's hope I'm right."



Though opening night is the true test, all's well that can go well so far.

"I'm having so much fun with this cast," Luchau said. "We are all very supportive of each other so it makes it really fun to play off of each other during these crazy scenes. Sharon knows how to handle people so it makes it great; she's doing an amazing job as director. She knows when to listen to suggestions and when to stick to a decision."

In case you are wondering, as I was, if Whitmer had a clown name the answer is yes. It was Polka Dot. Seems like a pretty

good name, even if a little on the nose.

"A Bad Year for Tomatoes" will be presented from Jan. 9 through Feb. 1 on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings at 7:30 pm at Theatre West, 3536 SE Highway 101, Lincoln City. Advance reservations for all performances are highly recommended.

Reservations for performances may be made by calling 541-994-5663. Tickets for the show are \$15.00 for adults, \$13.00 for seniors (60 and over) and for students (over 12). For more information, visit www.theatrewest.com.