

MOLLIE CLEVIDENCE,
JAY HASH AND
DARLENE RHODEN

VLT's New Act

Theater board hits the mark BY ANNA GRACE

The Very Little Theatre is among the oldest community theaters in the country. Quietly successful, the unassuming venue boasts some of the most reliable ticket sales in town. From them we've come to expect the earnest Arthur Miller drama, British farce and classic musical comedy — comfortable chestnuts staged by a representative slice of the Eugene community.

But a new spirit is moving within the aging, wood-paneled walls. Recently elected VLT president Jay Hash is a mere 31 years old, and he presides over a fresh theater board looking to shake things up.

I sat down with Hash, play committee chair Darlene Rhoden and production manager Mollie Clevidence to discuss their collective vision for the future as well as their reverence for the 20th-century glamour and democracy of the old VLT.

"This theater has been running forever, and that's a testament to what we've been doing," says Hash. "But the trick is to not let history get in the way of progress."

The list of recent changes at VLT has been daunting for some of the 100-plus members who run the theater. For instance, Hash updated the computer systems in the box office. He's dumped the tape recorder and the thousand-and-one-knob panel in the tech box, fully updating the sound and lighting systems.

VLT is now soliciting show sponsors and moving toward a capital campaign. While there has been some push back from the democratically run theater, Hash is determined. "The most dangerous words in the English language," he says, "are 'that's the way it's always been done.'"

The new board is also looking to spice up the theater's repertoire, including edgier works and more new plays. But in all decisions, including which plays get staged, the registered members have the final word. VLT has no artistic director or, as Rhoden puts it, "There is no god here."

It's tough, Rhoden notes, because "there is a certain disparity between the people who are working the shows and the people who come to watch them." Can you imagine the mess if a passel of brainy artists attempted to muscle a season over on an unsuspecting audience? She smiles, noting, "We'll want to do the occasional chestnut."

Thank God — or, rather, thank the membership — that there is still Stage Left, VLT's alternative space. This funky slice of the theater exists for new directors, locally written works and experimental drama. Production manager Clevidence says she has no qualms about working tech within this space. "Lighting is a blast," she says. "It always looks wonderful."

Not all VLT members approve, raising concerns that Stage Left drains resources from the main stage. Yet the new board is determined to champion the venue. "It's important to have this kind of freedom," Hash says.

With feet firmly planted in VLT's long history and their eyes on changes they'll need to make to ensure the theater's success in the future, the new board is poised for a challenging transition. This will be an exciting theater to watch. ■

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