

Riverbend Players bring 'The Odd Couple' to Nehalem

The joy of community theater is the chance to see friends and neighbors stretch beyond their comfort zone and inhabit personalities the polar opposite of their own. A pharmacist becomes a pirate; a police officer belts out *Sondheim*; a librarian gets to tap dance. Audiences and actors get to let their hair down and live in someone else's skin.

It's probably why Jack Nicholson called acting "everybody's favorite second job."

Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple" is a showcase for eccentric and colorful characters. It's why the Riverbend Players, a community theater group based at the North County Recreation District in Nehalem, chose it as their spring production.

"Everybody has heard of 'The Odd Couple,'" director Betsy McMahon says.

Debuting on Broadway in 1965, Simon's comedic classic revolves around two mismatched roommates: the neat, uptight Felix Ungar and the slovenly, easygoing Oscar Madison. The roles were further immortalized by Jack Lemmon and Walter Mathau, respectively, in the 1968 film adaptation.

Casting such legendary characters is no small task, yet McMahon found them in two Riverbend veterans, Brian McMahon and Mike Sims. Each were eager to sink their teeth into the iconic roles.

Brian McMahon, Betsy's husband, claims that the role of Oscar reflects many of his own traits. "This role



Photo by Dan Haag

Mike Sims, left, and Brian McMahon, right, can't wait for the curtain to rise April 16 for their production of Neil Simon's "The Odd Couple," directed by Betsy McMahon, center, at the NCRD Performing Arts Center in Nehalem.

is me, my alter ego," he says, laughing. "If Betsy didn't keep track, our house would be an absolute mess."

Sims — a Manzanita police officer — says Felix's fastidiousness is a big stretch for him.

"It's a challenge for me," he says. "I wouldn't have been interested if it was anyone but Brian playing opposite of me."

McMahon and Sims have shared the stage numerous times and formed a fast friendship, something that lends itself well to "The Odd Couple."



Submitted photo

The North County Recreation District's Performing Arts Center underwent a massive remodel during the last year.

"We are on stage together alone about one hour and fifty minutes out of two hours," Sims says. "It helps when you like and trust each other."

Riverbend Players formed in 2003 as a small reader's theater and quickly evolved into a group of about 40 that stages several plays and productions each year.

All involved agree that "The Odd Couple" is the biggest name play they've tackled.

Adding to the usual pomp and circumstance surrounding an opening will be the newly renovated NCRD Performing Arts Center. "The Odd Couple" will be the first production staged in the redone facility.

Betsy McMahon is thrilled to see how far the building has come. Though plays were staged there, its character was along the lines of Oscar Madison himself: disheveled and tattered around the edges.

"It was mostly storage, piles of stuff everywhere," she says.

That has changed with around \$200,000 worth of work: New lighting, seats, carpet, railings and a remodeled stage give the room a classic, regal feel.

McMahon cites strident local support from CARTM and Manzanita Lumber in the form of needed materials.

"This wouldn't have been possible without them," she says.

McMahon also notes the roster of Riverbend Players volunteers whose work goes far beyond what is seen on stage, such as lighting and set construction.

For Brian McMahon and Sims, opening night is most welcome after months of preparation.

They both laugh when people tell them after a show how easy they made acting look.

"It's fun to be up there in front of people" McMahon says, adding that's the beauty of theater. "You want people to say 'Hey, I'd like to do that.'"

Sims admits that everything about preparing a play is struggle: grueling rehearsals, missed lines, costume changes.

"It ain't easy, and I hate every second of it," he says. "I like it when the lights come on, and the seats are filled."

"The Odd Couple"

7 p.m. April 16, 22, 23, 29 and 30

2 p.m. April 17 and May 1

NCRD Performing Arts Center

36155 Ninth St., Nehalem

503-368-7008

\$15 for adults, free for children 12 and under



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Story by DAN HAAG

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The renovated NCRD Performing Arts Center, shown here in a panoramic view, will debut the Riverbend Players' production of "The Odd Couple" April 16 to May 1.