



Staff photos by Kathy Aney

The cast of "Death of a Hot Sauce Salesman" rehearses Wednesday night at the Hermiston Community Center for a murder mystery dinner. The city of Hermiston is seeking to use the venue for more often for theater and other types of performances.

# BREAK A LEG

City of Hermiston hopes to bring more theater to the community center

By JADE MCDOWELL  
East Oregonian

**T**he stage at the Hermiston Community Center is often used for speeches and award presentations, but Wednesday night it was the scene of a murder.

It wasn't a real murder — just a rehearsal for a murder mystery dinner. But the presence of "detectives" and "suspects" onstage points to an effort the city of Hermiston is making to use the stage at the community center for more theatrical purposes.

"It fits right in with our mission to be able to use the community center as a theater offering," city recreation director Brandon Artz said of the murder mystery performance. "Our hope is to bring more theater to the community center."

On Wednesday the ensemble cast of teenagers for "Death of a Hot Sauce Salesman" tested out their southern accents as they portrayed a soon-to-be-murdered hot sauce magnate, his heirs and the hired help.

"Stop," director Jenny Walker told the group after ninth grader Libby Labeau, playing the victim's idealistic granddaughter Magnolia, exclaimed that she wasn't after her grandfather's money because everyone knows money can't buy happiness. "That is the funniest thing you've ever heard," she told the actors.

They ran the line again, this time eliciting a hearty laugh from the money-hungry characters.

At the beginning of the show, Walker reminded the cast about a workshop they held Monday about character development.

"I asked you to think about who your character is and why they are doing what they're doing," she said.

The focus on understanding their character's backstory and motivations is especially important for the murder mystery format, she told them, because there will be times they have unscripted interactions with the audience.

Jenny and her husband Steve are in their sixth season helping direct and provide technical assistance for youth theatre through the parks and recreation department, but this is the first time they have helped with a show performed at the Hermiston Community Center instead of Armand Larive Middle School.

"I enjoy bringing art to the kids," Jenny said. "There are not that many arts opportunities for the kids here."

There aren't that many arts opportunities for the adults, either — other than performance opportunities with College Community Theatre at Blue Mountain Community College, the closest adult community theater group is in the Tri-Cities. Since the parks and recreation department took over the conference center



Staff photos by Kathy Aney

(ABOVE) Libby Labeau, an actor in "Death of a Hot Sauce Salesman," rehearses Wednesday night at the Hermiston Community Center for a murder mystery dinner. (BELOW) The cast of "Death of a Hot Sauce Salesman" rehearses Wednesday night at the Hermiston Community Center for a murder mystery dinner. The show will be performed April 27. Tickets are \$25 each or two for \$40 and must be purchased by April 20.



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Play director Jenny Walker talks to her actors at the Hermiston Community Center during a rehearsal of "Death of a Hot Sauce Salesman."



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Steve Walker, lighting technician and husband of play director Jenny Walker, works the light board at the Hermiston Community Center during a rehearsal of "Death of a Hot Sauce Salesman."

and rebranded it the Hermiston Community Center in January, Artz has been reaching out and talking to people in the community about starting a community theater troupe for adults that could rehearse and perform at the community center as well. Jenny said she would love to try out for plays through that group once it gets going.

For this spring, however, the department is looking at building up its youth theater program by separating it out into older and younger kids. A group of elementary school-aged children recently performed a version of "Cinderella," and now the teenagers are getting a chance to perform "Death of a Hot Sauce Salesman."

"One thing we're trying to do with the older kids is to involve them in the process more," Steve said.

While the younger actors were handed a costume and told to wear it, for example, the murder mystery cast is being given a budget and driven to Goodwill next week to put together their own costumes.

Steve handles lights and sound for the shows, and he said he and Artz are going through the lighting and sound equipment at the community center to learn the ropes and see what might be needed to improve future theater offerings at the center. While he's having to get used to a new system, he said it's nice for the students to be able to rehearse in the same space where they perform this time.

"The stage doesn't change shape and size," he said.

While some students have access to theater opportunities through their school, for some of the cast the city's theater offerings are their main opportunity for acting experience.

Labeau, playing the granddaughter, said there aren't regular high school plays at Hermiston Christian School where she attends.

"We did drama club for a while but it didn't last," she said.

Emma Rodgers, another Hermiston Christian student, has been in several of the city's productions. She said it was a good way to get to know other students who aren't in her classes.

"I just sort of wanted to do something different from my brothers because they did all sports," she said.

Twins Shae and Irelynd Boothroyd, freshmen at Hermiston High School, said this is their first foray into acting but after trying it on a smaller scale they intend to try out for plays at the high school in the future.

"We act in our bedrooms," Shae said. "Sometimes our parents know but sometimes we do it in secret, so we thought this would be a good opportunity to break into acting."

The murder mystery dinner "Death of a Hot Sauce Salesman" is April 27 at 6 p.m. at the Hermiston Community Center. Tickets, which include dinner, are \$25 apiece or \$40 for two and must be purchased by April 20.

"This is shaping up to be our best show yet," Jenny said. "I'm really excited."

Contact Jade McDowell at [jmcdowell@eastoregonian.com](mailto:jmcdowell@eastoregonian.com) or 541-564-4536.