

ARTS & CULTURE

Award-winning design for the decades

By SOPHIA EDELBLUTE
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Walking through the massive costume closet, or rather shed, at Rhonda Turnquist's house, it's no wonder she was nationally recognized for her costume design. Intricately sewn dresses, coats and skirts hang neatly in rows, organized by era and clothing type. Just sitting next to her is fascinating while she scrolls through her Pinterest boards, comparing historical dresses to her recreation of them, and Victorian suits to the ones she created for the Cottage Theatre's production of "The Importance of Being Earnest."

"Rhonda, she just sews all the time, she always working on something. She enjoys the challenge of creating," says Susan Goes,

executive director of the Cottage Theatre. "She is a wonderful asset to our organization."

This year, Turnquist won an honorable mention at the American Association of Community Theatre's 2021 Virtual Design Competition. There were nearly 50 entries according to Goes, and it was nice to see someone from Cottage Grove chosen to be in the top six.

"We were delighted," says Goes, "this the first time someone from our theater has entered this competition."

Usually the Cottage Theatre chooses not to enter because when the competition is in person the entries must be physically toted there and put on display. This year though, the fact that the competition was virtual made it much easier

to enter.

The competition typically only allows entries from the last two years, but because no one has been producing anything through the pandemic, the AACT opened entries to productions from the last 10 years.

The Cottage Theatre's entry for "The Importance of Being Earnest," was produced in 2017. "[The adjudicators] commented specifically for her costumes that they were particularly impressed by the quality and the fit of the men's suits," says Goes, "Because she had been making period suits for this Victorian-era production. Making suits, it's hard to get that right."

Turnquist has always loved historical costumes, specifically Victorian-era costumes, so "The Importance of Being Earnest" was

right up her alley.

"First thing I do is measure all my people and then I usually sit down with the director," says Turnquist. "For Earnest I said 'I put together a board specifically for Earnest. These are the costumes I think I can recreate, you tell me which ones of them you like and I'll get started.' And that's what I did."

Turnquist is humble and straightforward about her process. "I like the challenge to see if I can recreate it," she says. "I don't know why that is but that's who I am."

She made all 15 costumes for "Earnest" and likes to reuse materials like intricately embroidered curtains for her creations. She started sewing when she was eight and has been at it since. To date she's made hundreds of costumes for the Cottage Theatre and keeps the main



COURTESY PHOTO/COTTAGE THEATRE

The costume design for the Cottage Theatre's 2017 production of "The Importance of Being Earnest" won an honorable mention in this year's American Association of Community Theatre's Design Competition, marking of special note the tailoring and fitting of the men's suits.

costume attic in pristine organizational condition.

"I've long believed," Goes says, "that we do some really fine work on the stage and produce a better quality of show than you might guess given the size of Cot-

tage Grove... I was proud to see that what we're creating on our stage really is of a good caliber compared to theaters across the country. I had believed that but it was kind of a nice verification of that."

'The Harpies' descend on the Opal Center

By SOPHIA EDELBLUTE
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When hearing 'salon,' most people think of hairdressers and nail polish, but the Opal Center for Arts and Education's literary salon has nothing to do with hairstyling.

"Originating in the 17th century, literary salons were once the perfect training ground for aspiring authors, helping them improve their writing by getting feedback and criticism from their community," according to the Opal Center's website. And after a year of delays, rescheduling and planning, the literary salon is back.

The first event took place

on Saturday, July 10, and local authors James Burke and Rod Williams, from Cottage Grove based writers' group, The Harpies, were at the helm.

"We're hoping to continue what we started a couple years ago," says Burke. "There's a lot of writers in this community. A lot of people that are writing creatively and it's really nice to encourage them and be part of it, so this is a way to do that."

Michele Rose, executive director of the Opal Center, considered doing the salon through the pandemic over a live stream, but decided against it because "you really do feed off the audience," she says. It's been quite the delay

since Williams suggested restarting the salons in early 2020.

"It's been rescheduled like three times and this time's the charm," says Williams.

When the audience reaches close to 15 people and the clock strikes 6:30, Rose dims the lights and the featured authors begin their presentations.

Williams reads a selection from his fourth book, which is currently in progress, and the prologue of his first book, "An Americana Singer for the Twenty-First Century." His other books, written in 2015 and 2020 respectively are "Celestial Springs and Other Stories" and "The Light Don't Shine No More."

"I've been writing off and on since I was 15 or 16 years old," says Williams, "But just seriously the last ten years."

Burke starts his presentation with a mini-class on writing, editing and getting published. He emphasizes that you can never get anything published if you don't write it and the importance of editing your own work. He also shared a small section from his debut novel "Kelly's Reef."

He's been writing for 15 years, 10 of which were spent on "Kelly's Reef."

"I tell people, write because you like to write, not because you're gonna get a six-figure check from a publisher or a tour of New York book stores," says

Burke.

Both Burke and Williams tout the usefulness of a writers' group. The Harpies features six core members, who read over and critique each others work, along with offering writing tips and support to fellow authors.

"Writing's a solitary thing and sometimes it just helps to have a community of writers," says Williams. "That's part of the reason to have a group and part of the reason for doing the anthology that we're gonna try to be putting out this year."

The anthology is a showcase of local authors that The Harpies are working

on, relying on submissions from the community. They plan to have it published in early 2022.

"We'll see how that goes in the next year. See who comes out of the woodwork that we don't know about who's a writer," says Williams.

At about 8 p.m., after a Q&A with the audience and some more helpful writing tips, the first salon at the Opal Center featuring specifically authors from Cottage Grove comes to a close. Rose hopes to keep it up and emphasizes "it's up to you young people to the keep the momentum going, with these kind of live things."

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