

Lights, sounds and action

Behind the scenes at Happy Canyon

By NICK ROSENBERGER
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — From those in the spotlight to those behind the spotlights, the Happy Canyon Night Show is a labor of love for the roughly 750 participants — from the actors and those making sure they look the part to the light and sound technicians.

The show, which has been running longer than a century, takes many late nights, an ability to multitask and a good eye for detail to keep the show running smoothly, or as smoothly as the frenzied and energetic show can manage.

“There’s not one person that can make this happen,” said Allen Waggoner, who has been involved since around 1988 and whose wife Becky is this year’s show director. “It takes every person and every person has a very vital, important role. Regardless of the size of it, it is critical for all of it to work.”

Mary Finney, said she probably got involved with the show’s lighting in 1993 when her sweetheart brought her into the mix.

Nearly 30 years later, she still clammers up the ladder to the catwalk above the audience and through the narrow wooden walkways behind the scenes to make sure the lights wash the arena in splashes of color and light. Inspecting the roughly 800 lights throughout the set is just a part of the job.

“I was here because of the guy that I fell in love with and it’s really hard to leave. I don’t know ... I don’t know how you do that,” Finney said with a laugh.

Christina Jason and Nathan Garton, sound technicians for Night Show, work hand in hand with Finney to make sure sounds match up with changes in lighting. Between making sure sound levels are right to



Karen Ashbeck, left, does makeup Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021, for Hiyuum Nowland in the basement of the Happy Canyon Arena ahead of the Happy Canyon Night Show in Pendleton. Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

coordinating and syncing with what’s happening on stage, Jason and Garton are wedged into the fabric of the show.

“We’re involved in pretty much all the facets,” Jason said. “It bleeds through everything.”

With horses and carriages flying across the arena, actors diving off set pieces and dozens more rushing around, the staff and volunteers need to be on top of what’s happening.

“You kind of go with the

pace of the people,” Jason said. “It’s just one step at a time. You’ve got to be organized, you’ve got to have time management.”

While Waggoner doesn’t act in the show anymore, he remains an integral part, giving cues from the director’s booth for all the acts to keep the flow of the show on time. Most of the time, Waggoner is an act or two, or sometimes three, ahead in preparing for the next scene. Paying attention to the details and making sure he doesn’t get distracted is key to his success.

“If you get caught up watching what’s going on, then you’ll start missing things,” he said.

The pandemonium of Happy Canyon, however, is intertwined with a deep love of the show, including for Waggoner. From the moment his father-in-law, Robin Fletcher, threw him a buckskin outfit and asked him to be a part of the show after someone didn’t show up, Waggoner has loved it and been involved ever since.

“It’s family, it’s commu-



Allen Waggoner, right, gives directions to members of the backstage crew Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021, in advance of the Happy Canyon Night Show in Pendleton. Waggoner, who has been involved in the show since roughly 1988, issues the cues that keep the show running each night. Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

nity, it’s tradition, it’s culture,” he said. “It’s just special in all those ways.”

“I just love the live action, I love making history happen,” Jason said. “I love working with people, I

think it’s fantastic.”

Pendleton High School band teacher Andy Cary conducts the orchestra for the event. After a year of so many unknowns, he said, “it’s heartwarming and affirming” for the show to be back, even if it’s not at its best.

“Just knowing that we can all get together and make some music is amazing,” Cary said. “It just fills my soul.”

When the show is finally over for the night, Waggoner said there’s a sense of relief and appreciation for everyone’s hard work. When everyone who participates in the show works together, from the smallest roles to the biggest, it creates something special.

“Each time the show ends, there’s this personal sense of gratification after being part of something bigger than you are,” Waggoner said.

When the final act is over,



Lights illuminate sheet music Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2021, in the orchestra pit at the Happy Canyon Arena during the Happy Canyon Night Show in Pendleton. Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

appreciation runs through Waggoner and, “and you just take a moment to pause and reflect,” he said. “And just appreciate that, wow, you know, this is really cool to be a part of something this special.

Waggoner’s appreciation for the support of the community and volunteers is widespread — that hundreds of participants come back year after year to put on such an intricate and involved show is a feat in itself.

“We’re just so grateful we’re back at it again after a year off,” he said. “There’s a huge amount of energy, and you can just sense people are just excited to be back, excited to be a part of what we all love and enjoy.”

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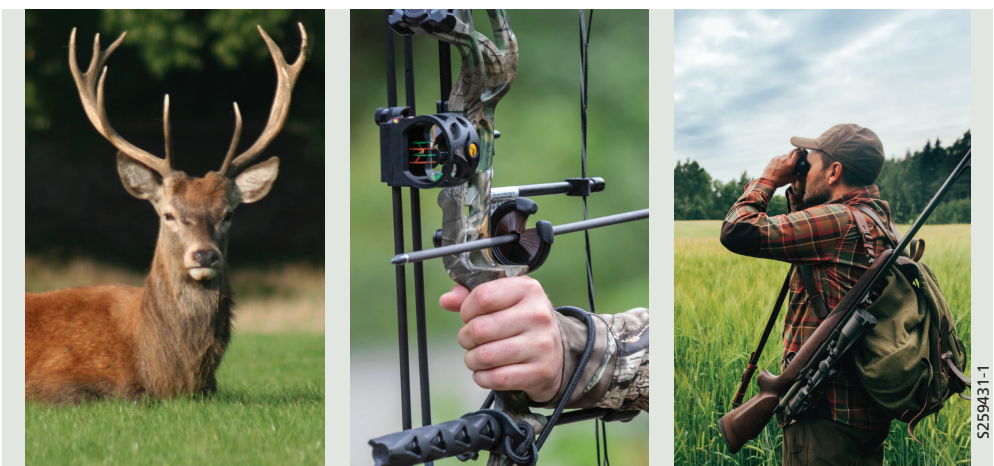
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