

# Patuxent Playhouse brings Neil Simon's "God's Favorite" to Calvert



## North County News

Pat Ullberg reports from Prince Frederick north

Who'd have thought the Book of Job could be hilarious? In Neil Simon's talented hands, this story becomes both contemporary and funny. In the original Biblical version, Job, a rich landowner and a virtuous, moral man, has his faith tested by God, through a series of calamities, each more awful than the last. In "God's Favorite," Simon moves the time period ahead several millennia, and sets it in a contemporary Long Island household headed by "Joe Benjamin (Joe-B)."

The Patuxent Playhouse, Calvert's oldest community theater group, has chosen this play for its spring 2006 presentation, to be performed next weekend and the following weekend on stage at the St. John Vianney Family Life Center in Prince Frederick.

One night last week, your columnist met to discuss this upcoming production, with Jack Reynolds, vice president of the Patuxent Playhouse board of directors, Keith Mervine, who is directing the play, and Rick Thompson, who plays "Joe," the leading role.

Both Thompson and Mervine have a long familiarity with this play, and each have directed it before in other productions in different venues.

"Both of them wanted to direct this production," Reynolds laughed.

"I'd rather direct than act, but the role of 'Joe' and the characterization fascinates me," Thompson said. "My favorite plays are hilarious, but about something — I say a play like this has a 'bottom' — a serious idea underneath; it's not just fluff and farce."

Mervine loves the play, and welcomes the chance to direct it again, although he also loves

to act, and had a part in last fall's production of "Rumors." All three men are dedicated to community theater, and to the Patuxent Playhouse.

Reynolds has been working with the Playhouse group for eight or 10 years, he thinks. He got involved because his sister was acting in the Playhouse production of "Godspell."

"One of the actors left four days before opening night, and so they asked me to take his part. Luckily, it wasn't a very big role, but I'd only been to a couple of rehearsals to watch my sister," Reynolds said.

His involvement increased after this beginning, and he married the founder of the group.

"Geri [Reynolds] started Patuxent Playhouse in 1989, when she got out of high school," Reynolds said. "She wanted to continue acting, and there wasn't any community theater in Calvert County then, so she started her own group. She has a real vision for the Patuxent Playhouse to be a community resource.

"We put on productions as fundraisers for local nonprofit groups. We did one last fall for the Prince Frederick Volunteer Fire and Rescue companies. We'll put on a production anywhere, but the relationship we have with St. John Vianney has been great," Reynolds said.

St. John Vianney's Family Life Center building has a state-of-the-art theater that seats about 200, and encourages its teenage parishioners to make use of it.

The Patuxent Playhouse group works with St. John Vianney's teen drama troupe, teaching them the basics and techniques of theatrical production.

Thompson brings many



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Left, Rick Thompson as "Joe Benjamin" and Randy Geck as "Sidney Lipton," God's messenger, in the Patuxent Playhouse production of "God's Favorite."

years experience with community theater to Patuxent Playhouse. During the 1970s and early 1980s he directed many shows for groups in Prince George's County, for Seabrook and Belair community theaters.

This production is his first with Patuxent, and marks his return to community theater. He had a 20-year hiatus from community theater until taking this role for the Patuxent Playhouse.

"I spent those 20 years — the years when my sons were growing up — coaching baseball. I usually don't act. I'll only do it for a role like this, or if I have to pay off a debt of gratitude to somebody," Thompson said.

Reynolds interjected that Thompson is also great at lighting design and is doing the design for this production.

"Rick got us the dimmer board and some lighting equipment from — what was it — 1932?" Reynolds teased.

"It's 1976, and good equipment," Thompson countered, not taking offense — this apparently is an old joke between them.

Mervine majored in theater in college and first worked in theater in Pennsylvania before moving to Calvert County when his wife, a music teacher, took a job here.

"I wasn't employed then, so I began working with the Greenbelt Arts Center," Mervine said. "I hung around so much they hired me as the facilities manager. But I realized we had a kid coming and I had to get a better job, so I went to NASA."

Mervine then worked with MAD, NASA's Music and Drama theater club.

"I directed 'Deathtrap,' but we opened right after 9/11. The script calls for weapons to be on the set, but NASA wouldn't allow on the premises anything that looked like real weapons. So we had to use cheap plastic toys, swords,

that looked horrible on set, but the audience loved the production."

He also has worked with the Port Tobacco Players, but thinks Patuxent Playhouse is the most dedicated of all the community theater groups he's worked with. His wife, Sherry, has a small part in "God's Favorite."

"We didn't have enough actors audition for the eight parts, so we drafted her. She has only about six or seven lines. We could have cut this and another small part, but Simon keeps control, and we'd have had to get his permission, which could have taken too long," Mervine said.

"God's Favorite" follows the meaning of the original biblical story very closely. Mervine noted that on one level, the Simon play is a very basic retelling of the story of Job.

Thompson, who is a journalist by profession, thinks Simon did a fantastic job making the moral and theology

clear while writing entertainingly.

"It's hard to write a play about religion without being sacrilegious. Bad writers can't manage this, and there's been a lot of bad plays with religious themes where the writers are actually sacrilegious. But Simon is a real professional. He can be irreverent and funny, but he knows exactly when to pull back, and how to keep from being sacrilegious. Despite all the funny stuff, the main character, 'Joe' has to be played dead serious, because he isn't going to renounce God."

Reynolds agreed, "At bottom, 'Joe Benjamin — Joe-B,' is a very serious person. He's serious about his family, about his home and his religion, and it's made clear very early in the play that he's very strong in his faith."

Mervine cautions the audience not to be in a hurry to leave after the final scene of this two-act drama.

"Rick [Thompson] has a musical surprise up his sleeve after the final scene."

"God's Favorite" is playing on Friday and Saturday, May 5, 6, and once more on May 12, the following Friday. Every performance is at 8 p.m. The third performance on May 12 was added because the cast thought the play was too important to run for just one weekend.

Patuxent Playhouse has lined up a fine cast of veteran actors, who should be able to do the production proud.

Tickets are \$15, and are available at the St. John Vianney Family Center, or on-line at [www.patuxentplayhouse.com](http://www.patuxentplayhouse.com).

The Patuxent Playhouse can be reached at 410/326-1401, or by e-mail, at [info@patuxentplayhouse.com](mailto:info@patuxentplayhouse.com).

*Readers' comments and/or suggestions are welcome. Letters may be sent to the Recorder; P.O. Box 485, Prince Frederick, MD 20678, or e-mail, [patullberg@comcast.net](mailto:patullberg@comcast.net).*