

Patuxent Playhouse volunteers work to bring comedy to the stage

A play, especially a comedy, has to look fresh and spontaneous when performed, but it takes time and effort for the actors to get a production to that state. Big-time productions with professional actors have the luxury of rehearsing during the day for at least a month before opening. Community theater, or little theater, productions are another story indeed. The actors and technicians who stage little theater productions have other full-time day jobs, so they have to rehearse evenings and weekends for several months before the opening.

This is the situation for the Patuxent Players, who are now performing "Lust n' Rust, The Trailer Park Musical." Everyone associated with the production is working a day job somewhere else. They have very long days when they have rehearsals, so it's a huge commitment of time and energy to rehearse and perform.

At about 7 p.m. last Wednesday evening, actors Geri Reynolds and Lisa Sciannella were sitting out in front of the St. John Vianney Family Life Center waiting for the rest of the players. Jack Reynolds, who is directing and acting in this production, was stuck in commuter traffic, and he had the center keys, Geri said. Geri and Jack are husband and wife, and parents of five children. Geri is the founder of the Patuxent Players. She was a drama major in school, and missed that when she graduated. Since there was no community theater in Calvert in 1989, she started a company.

I spoke with Dave Hoffman, vice president of the Patuxent Playhouse board, while he was at work in the auditorium. Hoffman built the sets — a trailer and a diner — and also does the lighting and sound. The play's title sounds a tad racy for production in a building owned by a church, but Hoffman says St. John Vianney doesn't



North County News

Pat Ullberg reports from Prince Frederick north

impose any criteria on the troupe's productions. He says Patuxent's board and cast members always look carefully at the scripts, and remove anything that would be objectionable to the church parishioners or Patuxent's audiences. Hoffman and the cast are very excited that the playwrights are coming from Illinois to the final performance. The musical has been produced once before, in Chicago in the 1990s.

Backstage Wednesday evening, Greg Rumpf, who plays "Steve," and Elizabeth Lang, who plays "Janette," were eating takeout dinners as they waited to rehearse with the rest of the cast. They've been working on the current production since the play was selected in May, Rumpf said.

"Rehearsals slowed down a bit during the summer, what with vacations, but we've been rehearsing daily for about a month," Rumpf said.

Rumpf said "Steve," his character, is the "snake-in-the-grass" out-of-towner from New Jersey. "Steve" meets a girl at the trailer park, but it's not clear if they'll be together at the play's close.

"Not knowing until the very end keeps the suspense up," Rumpf said.

"There has to be a love interest," Lang chimed in. The trailer park is located in a town called "Twister Plains," Illinois. They wondered if there was a real town of that name. Rumpf said he'd check it on the Internet.

The backstage at this new auditorium is large, clean and spacious, not your usual makeshift quarters community theaters have to cope with. The dressing rooms — one for each gender — also are well-appointed and well-lit.

Geri Reynolds came out of the women's dressing room to model a costume for her date scene. She was considering two different outfits, tunics to be worn over Capri jeans. One outfit, more subdued in color and style, her fellow players considered too quiet for her character's taste. They advised her to go with the louder, patterned number.

Things got busy and rather complicated at this point. Jack Reynolds, wearing his director's hat, was doing about 15 things at once. Wardrobe, props and woman-of-all-work, Millie Coryer-Dhu, came in with a rolling cart, filled with beauty salon items for the hairdressing scene. Dionne Gause, who came in just then, was thrilled, since she's the actor handling these props. Dionne plays "Latisha," one of the trailer park residents. She asked about her wig. Millie said the wig hadn't arrived yet.

Jack assured her he'll find her a wig, if the one on order isn't delivered. He grouched that he paid extra for express two-day delivery, and it's been three days. Coryer-Dhu reminded him that Monday was the holiday and that was probably the delay.

"It'll be here tomorrow, I'm sure," she soothed.

She's assembled all the other props — fake food for the diner, and fabric to complete the actors' costumes. She unfolded a length of slinky gold metallic fabric. She found this slinky stuff difficult to work with, she said, but wanted something that would show up onstage. She showed this material to Jack, along with fabric for the diner tablecloths.

"Fine. It's fine," he said, waving it

away without really looking. Coryer-Dhu shrugged, and began measuring and cutting the fabric.

"Thank heavens for Joanne Fabrics," she muttered. "This all came off the remnant table."

Mike Herrenton arrived then, and threw himself into a chair. He lives in St. Mary's County, but works as a tow truck driver for Chips Towing Service in Sunderland. He's been putting in 18-hour days between work, rehearsals and home. He plays "Junior" and is the only cast member who hasn't had prior experience in community theater. Patuxent Playhouse has open auditions for every production, and selects the candidates who can best personify the characters. Herrenton hasn't been involved in theater before, except for a brief stint in a rock band in high school. He said his job is facing distressed — sometimes crazed — humanity daily, in the form of stranded motorists, and that's all the experience a person needs for any other pursuit, including acting.

The cast members may come from anywhere in the tri-county area, or further, and travel many miles from their jobs to get to rehearsal in Prince Frederick, and then more miles to get home. That makes for a very long day. But opening night is Friday, so Jack is adamant that tonight they'll rehearse at least two scenes and the dance numbers.

They start with the hair-dressing scene. The four principal women cast members participate in this scene. Jack directs from the front row auditorium seats. The scene starts and then someone flubs a line, so they start again from the beginning. The actors stop and discuss how to give non-verbal cues to each other to help remember the order of their lines. They start again. Another flub, and this time one of the other actors tries to help by speaking the line. "You can't do that!" Jack shouts.

"You [actors] absolutely can't feed a line to someone else."

The actors are losing impetus with all the interruptions, so Rumpf brings the playbook onstage to take over as prompter. After a couple more mistakes, Jack grumbles, "This is where I go out and drink."

He does leave, but only long enough to take a couple of deep yoga breaths.

"Okay ladies, we've got seven minutes before we open," Jack bellowed as he returned.

There is tension, naturally, as the cast hammers out the scene, but they're disciplined, and good-natured with each other. No one acts like a diva, or throws temperamental fits. They finish the scene at last, with Geri's song. The dreaded dance rehearsal is next, dreaded because it's getting late and everyone is tired. The cast members all have to work the next day, some at jobs that require a lot of concentration. For instance, Lisa Sciannella, who plays "Tanya," is a nurse at Calvert Memorial Hospital. She recently began working on the psychiatric ward, so finds her patients' conditions are a challenge.

Their toil through the weeks of long evening rehearsals has paid off. The opening night last Friday was a big hit, this writer hears.

They're willing to give large chunks of their personal time for many weeks, to work as hard and as long as necessary to make their productions shine onstage. And it's an all-volunteer effort. They cover the auditorium rent and production costs from ticket sales, and hope they break even.

Readers' comments and/or suggestions for topics for future columns are welcome. Letters may be sent to the Recorder; P.O. Box 485, Prince Frederick, MD 20678, e-mail, patullberg@com-cast.net.