

All the State's a Stage

Story by Arlene Distler



The Vermont Shakespeare Company produces the works of the Bard outdoors.

BEN SARLE

When summer rolls around, the curtains rise on a world-class collection of professional theater companies across Vermont.

Note to readers: This article focuses on professional summer theater in Vermont. Northern Stage in White River Junction (at the downtown Briggs Opera House) and the Vermont Stage Company (with shows at the Flynn Center in Burlington) are both important Vermont theater companies that have year-round programs but do not typically perform during the summer months. The performance season at Northern Stage is October through May, while summer is devoted to a wide range of performing arts classes for students ages four to adult (www.northernstage.org). Vermont Stage produces five shows between October and May. This year, for

the first time, VSC is also offering a summer show: “Woody Guthrie’s American Song” at the Middlebury Town Hall Theater, July 21 through 26 (www.vtstage.org).

In addition to these professional companies, innumerable community theaters do extraordinary work across the state of Vermont, from plays and musicals to circus arts and puppetry; unfortunately, we’re not able to include them all here. Thanks to the Vermont Arts Council for helping us to compile the original list. If we’ve omitted any companies, the fault is entirely ours (and we’re sure we’ll be hearing about it in short order).

—Kathleen James, Editor

OUT IN THE VERMONT countryside, and in its small towns and cities, we pride ourselves on a no-nonsense, down-to-earth, low-key lifestyle. Even so, there’s something about going to the theater. You can feel it as you climb the gently rising stairs of the Weston Playhouse and wait in the expansive lobby, decorated with photographs of this year’s company. Among the bejeweled and the Birkenstocked, there is shared excitement as theatergoers wander out to the back terrace, overlooking the West River and its falls. No matter how hot a summer night, delicious breezes are at play, and all in all, the notion that there’s such a thing as “man versus nature” seems a silly conceit. When it comes to theater in Vermont, they co-exist in exquisite equilibrium.



The Weston Playhouse Theatre was founded in 1937, making it the oldest professional theater in Vermont.

Despite the hard times, Vermont theater seems to be thriving. Climbing subscription rates and private donations give credence to the perception that in a time when people must make do with less, they are more appreciative

than ever of the gifts that art gives—particularly theater, in which we can lose ourselves in others’ lives, laugh and have our hearts lifted with song and dance and romance.

I find it to be axiomatic that professional theater companies dream of finding that play that quickens the pulse with its new vision of theater, or speaks a truth no one had thought to speak before. No longer the province of big cities, Vermont theater companies are not only performing familiar works, but also helping new work to see the light of day.

WESTON PLAYHOUSE THEATRE COMPANY

Each summer, professional actors from Broadway and Hollywood arrive in south-central Vermont to bring theater to the Green Mountain state that can rival any found in Manhattan. Their destination is the Weston Playhouse, an elegant white building with a broad stairway and Greek Revival columns that looks out over the town green.

Harlan Grant founded the Weston Playhouse Theatre in 1937, making it the oldest professional theater in Vermont. Since 1988, the playhouse has been managed by the triumvirate of producer-directors Malcolm Ewen, Tim Fort and Steve Stettler, who all came to Weston as actors within a few years of each other in the early 1970s. Stettler is the only one to stay at Weston year-round.

Sitting in his office, a large room in an old farmhouse lined with posters of past productions, Stettler’s enthusiasm and energy is like a small tornado. Since Ewen, Fort and Stettler took over in 1988 — each with dual backgrounds in education and professional theater, and each with a particular theatrical focus (between them they cover music, directing, acting and design)—the theater’s growth and success has outpaced even

their own goals. That may in part be due to what Stettler cites as their decision to “rededicate” Weston to its Vermont audience. Statistics show that most of Weston’s audience comes from not more than an hour’s drive away; about a third are vacationers for whom Weston Playhouse is a regular part of their stay in Vermont. To fulfill their vision, Stettler says, the theater has had to fundraise over and above ticket sales, and they have been able to do that successfully. Individual donations are up 35%.

The decision to focus on a more local audience has translated into more challenging plays, plays for children, programs in the schools, and other events aimed at enhancing the theater-going experience. These programs are Weston’s way of showing appreciation for the community’s generous support, but they also feed into a core belief among the three producer-directors. “We often say ‘theater needs to be enrichment, not just entertainment,’” says Stettler. “The experience an audience has sitting in their seats for two hours is a fraction of the benefit they ought to derive from theater.” In addition to the aforementioned programs, the theater now offers a “Director Talk” before some performances, and a “Talk-Back” afterwards, when audiences get to ask questions of the director and cast.



Malcolm Ewen, Tim Fort and Steve Stettler have been producing directors at the Weston Playhouse for more than 20 years.

While the playhouse is deepening the theater-community nexus, it is also getting national attention for the quality of its work. Last summer's *Light in the Piazza* got rave reviews in *Variety* and the *Wall Street Journal* and was favorably reviewed online on *Playbill.com*. "We've moved beyond regional to national significance," says Stettler. "Nevertheless, it's just acknowledging the strength of the work we are doing here for our Vermont audiences."

These days, the Weston Playhouse is "a happy three-ring circus," as Stettler puts it. On a given weekend it's possible to see up to four productions, including the Main Stage, the Cabaret, the "Other Stages" production and staged readings. "We want it to be like a theater festival, with a variety of offerings," he says.

Looking toward the future, the playhouse board recently purchased Walker Farm, and plans to build a 150-seat black-box theater that will be flexible enough to accommodate educational programs, alternative fare that needs a more intimate setting, and plays for children, a growing consideration for many regional theater companies.

Productions in this smaller theater will also provide space for Weston's "New Works" program, a need that has gone begging in today's theater world. Broadway is too expensive for producers to take a chance on untried playwrights, says Stettler, and even New Haven and Boston, once the established routes for new work, are no longer feasible. "It is something we've always wanted for Weston—to make a contribution to new work," says Stettler. After thinking a moment, he adds, "What we have that's unique, that we can maximize for the good of the art and the good of our audience, is a beautiful rural retreat. And Vermont has a tradition of artists—especially writers—coming here and doing their

best work." With that in understanding, writer retreats and an annual award for a new musical and a new dramatic play have recently been initiated at Weston.

Productions at Weston for the 2009 season will run June 23 through September 6. Main stage productions will include *Rent* and *A Raisin in the Sun*; there are also concurrent Other Stages productions and a Young Company production of *Stuart Little*. For more information, go to www.westonplayhouse.org. Weston Playhouse Theatre Company, 703 Main Street, Weston; for tickets, call the box office at (802) 824-5288.



The Dorset Playhouse has been summer home to a professional company since the late 1970s.

DORSET THEATRE FESTIVAL

The Dorset Theatre Festival resides in a classically beautiful Vermont town. A small general store faces the stately Dorset Inn, with its marvelous porch from which one may watch the world go by at a civilized pace. If you continue from the center of town and follow the signs, you'll find yourself in a quiet hollow surrounded by pines, where the Dorset Playhouse is nestled. It is deceptively rustic. The playhouse occupies one of the two original pre-Civil War barns that were moved to the spot in the 1920s, now fully renovated and made into a modern theater. For most of the year, it's home to an active

amateur community theater group, the Dorset Players. And in summer, the Festival arrives.

The Theater Festival in its present form was founded in the 1970s by the late Jill Charles with John Nassivera, two writers that lived in the area.

They revised the classic summer stock formula—one week of rehearsal, one week of performing—to today's regime, which allows twice the rehearsal time and twice the performance run. Dorset Theater Festival puts on four plays during its summer season, each featuring a different director.

Wunderkind Carl Forsman took over the reins of the Festival in 2005, and with his considerable energy and vision has turned DTF into one of the most creatively alive and fiscally solid theater companies around.

Forsman acknowledges his challenges in these hard economic times but is upbeat about the future for Dorset. "You know," he says, "getting people to a theater for the first time is a bit of black magic—it happens through some kind of alchemy. But what I have some control over is whether they *come back*. It's up to us to do work that is so compelling and exciting that

people can't stay away." Judging from the packed houses all season long, he seems to be doing just that.

Forsman's delight at being at the helm of DTF is evident: "I feel deeply connected to this state." He first learned about the Dorset Playhouse while a theater major at Middlebury College, and has long considered it to be "sacred ground." Forsman also runs the New York City-based Keen Company, and brings some of his directors and actors to Vermont each summer.

Forsman's special affinity is with early 20th century American work, and he points to *Our Town* as his artistic touchstone. "The humanism of this work speaks so continually and

Vermont Shakespeare Company brings a “fresh, hip and extremely physical approach to Shakespeare” in its summer productions.

BEN SARLE



profoundly to our experience. I am always moved by the strength of its spirit and the simplicity of its storytelling. High art doesn't include the need to confound or confuse.”

Noting that DTF has brought two productions north from his New York company, he looks forward to working “in the other direction—to develop and perform plays here and then eventually bring them to New York City.”

DTF continues its commitment to rediscovering George S. Kaufman's plays for American audiences, this year presenting *Merton of the Movies*. The season opens on June 17th with Connor McPherson's *St. Nicholas*, and ends in August with *Mary Me A Little*, a Stephen Sondheim musical. For more information on the DTF, go to www.dorsettheatrefestival.org. All performances are at the Dorset Playhouse, 104 Cheney Road, Dorset. For tickets, call (802) 867-5777 or e-mail dtfoffice@gmail.com.

VERMONT SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

Just before press time, the Vermont Shakespeare Company announced

it would be producing a baby this summer, instead of a play. That's bad news for Vermont theater fans, but wonderful news for Jena Necrason and John Nagle, who collaborated on the pregnancy and also co-founded VSC in 2005. Their baby is due in August, and they'll be back next summer for what they promise will be a “witty and fiery” two-weekend production of *Much Ado About Nothing*.

VSC is a professional theater company that produces the works of the Bard on an outdoor stage at Knight Point State Park in North Hero. The company's goal, says Necrason, is to present “wildly innovative productions” with a “fresh, hip and extremely physical approach to Shakespeare. We work with actors who really understand Shakespeare; they give the language meaning and emotion and know how to connect it to the body. It's very common for our audience members to say ‘Wow, I always thought Shakespeare was hard to understand, but I understood every word.’ We even had one person ask whether we had rewritten the play!”

VSC arrived on the Champlain

Islands in 2005 with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Necrason's parents live there, and her mother had asked Jena and John if they would stage a professional production in town as a fundraiser. The couple readily agreed; they hope to move to Vermont within the next few years—while continuing to work in theater—and the 2005 show seemed a good way to get started. Since then, VSC has produced a Shakespeare play every August and also offered intensive workshops for schoolchildren and professional actors from Vermont.

Artistic director Necrason is a performer, choreographer, director and teaching artist who has lived and worked in New York City since 1991. Her husband John is an actor and director who has toured the country extensively, performing in 38 states. (As an aside, he's one of only a handful of people ever approved by Warner Brothers to be the voice of Scooby Doo, the famous crime-fighting cartoon dog.) Both Necrason and Nagle are faculty members at the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in Manhattan.

“Our goal is to develop a viable Shakespeare festival in Vermont,

Founded in 1977, Lost Nation Theater has been at home in Montpelier since 1989. At right, a scene from "To Kill a Mockingbird."

expanding into Burlington, with two shows—one drama, one comedy—running for a full month," she says. "Our time in New York City has run its course. Vermont is such a rich cultural region; the artistic community is so vital and has a lot going on."

Check the Vermont Shakespeare Company Website at www.vermont-shakespeare.org for information about the 2010 performance of *Much Ado About Nothing*; tentative dates are August 13–15 and 19–22.

OLDCASTLE THEATER COMPANY

Five actors formed Oldcastle Theater Company in New York City in 1972. It was a touring company and would perform regularly in Bennington, where one of the founders, Eric Peterson, was raised. Eventually Peterson settled back in his hometown and brought the theater company with him. After being located at Southern Vermont College from 1977 to 1993, Oldcastle moved to the roomy, modern Bennington Center for the Arts and has flourished there.

Oldcastle has reached out to area colleges, enabling the company to do shows with large casts that include a mix of equity actors (some live nearby) and students and professors. An important part of Oldcastle's mission involves the mutual benefits of professional actors and students interacting. Peterson says they learn from each other, with the energy and enthusiasm of the students infusing and being contagious to the professionals, and the professional actors' knowledge of the craft an invaluable hands-on learning experience for the students.

Four plays are produced during the "main stage" season at Oldcastle, featuring equity actors from New York and around the country. This year the season opens with a satirical comedy, *One Two Three*, by Ferenc Molnar. Activities during the "off season" vary—this year that will include readings of new plays during April and May, performed throughout



Bennington County and the Berkshires in Massachusetts. During the winter, "Actor's Express" will take the show on the road with readings in Vermont, Massachusetts and New York.

One of Oldcastle's proudest achievements, says Peterson, was being the original developer and producer of *Judevine* by Vermont poet David Budbill. The play was first performed at Oldcastle in 1988. It has been performed there four times since, including the only presentation of the two-part, four-hour version. *Judevine* tells the unvarnished story of small-town rural life in a fictional Vermont town; it has been enormously popular throughout Vermont and has since been produced in 24 states. Producing plays relevant to New England is an important aspect of Oldcastle, Peterson says. "We have done plays on civil unions and about Ethan Allen, and are continuously on the look-out for new work," he adds. They offer readings of new works for an audience and decide from that process what scripts might merit full production. According to Peterson, plays originating at Oldcastle have been produced in 30 states and 18 countries.

This year's four main productions, running June through October, include: *One Two Three* by Ferenc Molnar (adapted by Morwyn Brebner); *Almost, Maine* by John Cariani; *Betrayal* by Harold Pinter; and *Third* by

Wendy Wasserstein. For information, go www.oldcastletheatreco.org. OTC is located in the Bennington Center for the Arts, Route 9 at Gypsy Lane, Bennington; (802) 447-0564.

LOST NATION THEATER

Lost Nation Theater was founded in Bristol in 1977 and spent its first six years as a touring company, producing only original material and taking it to New York and Montreal. In its next incarnation it lived over a pizza parlor in Bristol, and in 1989 made the move to Old City Hall in Montpelier, a space owned by the city and donated to Lost Nation.

Lost Nation has a strong year-round program, with educational and outreach programs such as the Youth Theater Labs, held in elementary schools. Lost Nation also invites other theater groups to give performances during the Winter Series, held in January and February. During the regular season, which runs April through October, six plays are produced. Actors are brought in from regional auditions held at equity and non-equity events throughout the United States. There is an intern program as well. Lost Nation has been cited by the New York Drama League as "one of the best regional theaters in America."

Knowing where Lost Nation Theater got its name says much about



A production of "Trying" at Oldcastle Theater, based at Bennington Center for the Arts since 1993.

it. Kim Bent, the theater's founder and artistic co-director, grew up in Braintree, on his family's farm that overlooks the Braintree range. There was a spot in the range that was regarded by locals as special—a place hard to get to, where one could dream and reflect. Locals called it "Lost Nation." As Bent traveled and realized that these rural, remote and secret places exist throughout America, the name came to symbolize something that spoke deeply to him about frontier, breaking boundaries, doing challenging and courageous things—yet being grounded in place and community.

Lost Nation is more than willing to do challenging and creative things, early on exploring subjects such as AIDS and the Vietnam War. Says producing artistic director Kathleen Keenan, "We give actors and directors a chance to do something different. We are in an intimate setting, a 150-seat theater with seating on three sides of the stage, but because of where we are the production values can be as good as a traditional proscenium theater." She says newly arriving actors and directors from New York City and other urban centers are struck by the beauty, by the supportive community,

and by the creative freedom they are given. "Everything is very collaborative; directors and actors have plenty of license to interpret...but we offer them our support and help." This winning combination has attracted actors and directors to join the Lost Nation "creative family" from as far away as California and Chicago, Washington and Boston. And some of them, according to Keenan, have chosen to stay. In many cases the "imported" talent has become local.

Lost Nation's 2009 season will run April through October and includes six plays, opening with *The Miracle Worker* by William Gibson and continuing with *Love, Isadora* by Rick Foster. Full schedule and play descriptions: www.lostnationtheater.org. Location: 39 Main Street, City Hall, Montpelier; call (802) 229-0492.

SKINNER BARN

Skinner Barn is a big, beautifully restored post-and-beam landmark in Waitsfield that is home to productions put on by the nonprofit Commons Group. Its founder and the creative force behind Skinner Barn is Peter Boynton, who bought the 1890s dairy

barn two decades ago. It's named for the barn's original owner, the family of Daniel Skinner.

Boynton's associates in the New York theater world (he was a soap-opera star and Broadway actor) are the rich pool from which he draws in bringing actors and directors to Waitsfield. Nick Corley, during the winter months the artistic director of the Lyric Theater in Oklahoma, is a frequent director at Skinner Barn. Jono Mainelli is the music director.

There are usually two plays produced each season—one musical and one drama. "It has a Judy Garland, Mickey Rooney 'let's put on a play' quality. It's fresh," says Boynton. In the summer there is a teen camp, for which cast members are also teachers. The Skinner Barn has been lauded by *Seven Days*, Burlington's weekly paper, as "the best theater for musicals" in the state, noting in particular "its wonderfully warm acoustics."

Skinner Barn will host theater camps until its summer season's cabaret presentations in July; the theater's main production, in August, will be *Always...Patsy Cline*. For more information, go to www.theskinnerbarn.com. Skinner Barn is located at 606 Common Road (Route 100) in Waitsfield. Call (802) 496-4422 or e-mail info@theskinnerbarn.com.

ST MICHAEL'S THEATER

St. Michael's Theater, billed as "Greater Burlington's professional theater," started out in an old wooden building on the St. Michael's College campus. Founder Henry Fairbanks opened the first production in 1947. His mission was to make use of campus space left vacant in summer by bringing professional theater to Vermont. This remains the St. Michael's Theater mission, but another goal has been added since its inception, says producing artistic director Chuck Tobin: to use play production as an educational tool in an internship program. The program works in collaboration with St. Michael's and other college theater and art departments. This has proven a boon to all concerned. Says Tobin, "The students go back to their classes with new ideas."

The McCarthy Theater is the company's home since 1975. It has been renovated and upgraded periodi-

cally to become of the finest and most well-equipped theaters in the state. It has 366 seats, a hydraulic lift for the orchestra pit, flying sets and full shops for crafting scenery. Actors, directors, designers and choreographers come from New York City, primarily, but also from Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Boston. Tobin also chooses the season's line-up and enjoys finding just the right mix of music, comedy, and more serious fare.

The Saint Michael's 2009 season opens with *Dames At Sea*, billed as "a send-up of 1930s Hollywood musicals...love blooms, taps fly, confusion reigns!" For schedule and descriptions of all four shows go to <http://academics.smcvt.edu/playhouse>. Saint Michael's Playhouse is located at One Winooski Park in Colchester; call (802) 654-2281.

QNEK

Lynn Leimer is the reigning monarch of QNEK, the resident theater company of the Haskell Opera House, located in Newport, in the Northeast

Kingdom. Those initials can stand for either "Queen of the Northeast Kingdom" (a nickname Leimer's flatlander friends have given her) or "Quebec and the Northeast Kingdom." Leimer, a professional actor who worked in New York City and New Jersey before moving to Newport in 1991, has as her official title CEO and artistic director of QNEK.

The theater company started in 1993 by putting on performances at Lake Willoughby. Three years later, they moved into the Haskell Opera House. And thus it happens that QNEK can bill itself as Vermont's only international theater, with the auditorium straddling Canada and the United States. "We're like Switzerland," says Leimer. "The stage is in Canada and the audience is in Vermont, but we're neutral territory."

Calling the Haskell Opera House "a gem of a theater," with its cherubs, gold leaf and sculpted woodwork, all original, Leimer points to its importance to the community in the rugged and hardscrabble Northeast Kingdom. The season's fare ranges from Ten-

nessee Williams to "madcap," says Leimer. "People around here like to laugh and be entertained. Comedies are our most popular plays. Then come musicals." And while the season reflects those tastes, QNEK also "pushes the envelope whenever possible." It was among the first theater companies in the nation to produce *Two Guys*, a play about 9/11. And each season they try something they haven't done before. This summer that will be Cole Porter, with a production of *Anything Goes*, tap dance and all.

QNEK will present plays in May, August and September. The opening play, running May 8 to 16, is *The Furtelle Family Saga—Southern Hospitality*, "a hilarious send-up of small-town pageants." *Anything Goes* and *Tin Pan Alley* complete the season. For more information, go to www.qnek.com. The Haskell Opera House is located at 96 Caswell Avenue in Derby Line. Call (802) 873-3022 or (802) 334-2216. **▼**

Arlene Distler is a freelance writer and poet based in Brattleboro. She wrote about collective art galleries in the 2008 Arts & Culture issue.

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We'd like to thank our vital partners at Harwood Union, including Jean Berthiaume, Maureen Charron-Shea and their students — and our generous VPT members — for helping us explore new ways to integrate public television with the public good.