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Pulse: Professional musical theater enters the Limelight

Pulse | Elynn Wexler



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Starting up a theater company amid an economic downturn, cuts to government funding of the arts and the demise of many an established arts organization is not everyone's idea of wise decision making. But Jan Stewart, producing director and founder of the new Limelight Theatre, says he's not the kind of guy who would change his plans for those reasons.

"It's pretty ballsy," the 60-year-old Rockville attorney acknowledges. "I feel good about it. That's how I do things."

Musical theater seems an unlikely passion for a lawyer with a successful 30-year estate planning practice. Stewart has a ready explanation: As the son of opera singers Thomas Stewart and Evelyn Lear, he spent untold hours in the Berlin theaters where they performed while he was growing up.

As such, he says, "The stage is familiar and comfortable."

And then there's the singular passion for music the Rockville Chorus member says "has overtaken me. I'm consumed with it."

Sure, Stewart still practices law 35 to 40 hours a week. Yet, for almost a year, he has devoted most of the balance of his waking hours to creating Limelight Theatre. A packed schedule suits him.

"I don't sit well," says Stewart, who also finds time to play tennis, hike and cycle.

The impetus to follow this new path was a production of Richard Maltby Jr. and David Shire's "Closer Than Ever" that he saw more than a year ago at St. Michael's College in Burlington, Vt.

"I hadn't seen the show in a while," Stewart says, noting that his first experience of the "enchanting musical" from the creators of the more celebrated "Miss Saigon," "Baby" and "Ain't Misbehavin'" was at the Jewish Community Center in



Limelight Theatre
 The cast: (From left) Michael Grew, Elizabeth Hester, Katie Nigsch, David Kozisek, Elizabeth Parsons and John Dellaporta.



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Rockville during the 1990s.

"Closer," he says, "is all about life — love relationships, experiences, challenges. Its musical lines are beautiful. The lyrics are philosophical and lyrical, sometimes funny and witty."

As a parent, Stewart is particularly taken with the song "Father of Fathers," about how "our children help define who we are and why we're here."

After seeing the student show, Stewart recalls, "I was moved to the point that I felt I had to be involved."

He was primed to invest his time and money in a project that would combine his love for musical theater and his organizational abilities.

"That's what I do. I've produced legal forums, piano recitals," he says. "It's a natural [fit]."

Duly inspired and convinced, Stewart defined missions for his production company. First, the company would employ "local artists, all cast and staff, as best we can." And then, believing that theater has become expensive and therefore "elitist," he feels it is essential to make the company's productions affordable and accessible to "anyone in the community who loves theater." As such, Stewart says, complimentary tickets have been set aside for distribution through organizations like Community Ministries and the Jewish Social Services Agency, and veterans undergoing treatment at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Stewart put together a budget, secured a venue for his inaugural production and enlisted director Jay D. Brock, who has worked with him to hire an "outstanding professional staff," conduct auditions — "sixty people came for six roles" — and bring Limelight Theatre's first production to the stage.

As for Brock, he had "the slot open for the year" and was delighted to have "a paying job" with Stewart, whom he describes as "very passionate about what he is doing." The partnership has transformed the contract director gig into what Brock sees as a stable staff position.

"I became aware that there was a company beyond the musical," says the 30-year-old Californian who came to D.C. three years ago for a more supportive creative environment and an opportunity to "get my chops as a freelance director."

"There's a real glass ceiling" in Los Angeles, he observes. "The East Coast has a richer foundation."

Brock's and Stewart's talents complement each other.

"Jan is a savvy lawyer, but he didn't know the business of theater," says Brock, who holds two master's degrees, one in directing from The Catholic University of America.

The duo put together a five-year plan, hired some of Brock's professional contacts and put a board together — "not theater people," says the director, but rather "people who can find money."

After working mostly in opera and classical theater, Brock says doing musical theater struck him as "a fun prospect." While he had heard of the "Closer" composers, and had seen other work of theirs, he was unfamiliar with this musical.

"The quality of the music is its [Closer's] strength," he says now. "And everyone I talk to — colleagues, people who came to audition — has at least one song from the show in their audition repertoire."

The revue-type musical's songs, a few of them borrowed from the duo's other musicals, he says, are "lovely and well written."

Some 20 independent vignettes, linked by themes of love and loss, give each performer three to four minutes to tell a complete story. The experience, says Brock, "reminds me of doing 20 [consecutive] music videos."

"A few tweaks" to some of the lyrics were necessary to update the 1989 musical. The decision to expand the original four-member cast to six gave the production more of "an ensemble feel" in contrast to the "concert piece" Brock believes was originally intended. The non-singing characters they added, he says, "create a more dramatic or theatrical experience" and enable the stories to be told "in a clear, visual way."

Stewart's reaction to the design run-through echoes his feelings about the college production he saw in Vermont.

"I've been working on this baby for a year, and I was moved," he says.

What's next for the theater company Stewart named for the light he says "illuminated stages before electricity?"

When "we get up to speed," Stewart wants to do two to three shows a year. And Limelight's second offering is likely to be a better-known show.

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For now, Stewart and Brock are content to see the fruits of the past year's labors on stage before a live audience.

Show times for "Closer Than Ever" are 8 p.m. Friday as well as May 13, 15 and 16, and 3 p.m. May 10, Mother's Day, in the Jewish Community Center's Kreeger Auditorium, 6125 Montrose Road, Rockville. Tickets are \$25, \$15 for seniors (65-plus), students and groups of six or more. For the Mother's Day matinee, mothers accompanied by a family member purchasing an adult ticket will be admitted free. Call  301-395-4440  or visit www.mdlimelight.com.

This column is intended as a place to tap the pulse of some of the multitude of creative people and organizations that constitute Montgomery County's professional arts community and celebrate their achievements. Your comments and suggestions are welcome; e-mail ewexler@gazette.net.

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