

Arts & Entertainment

Washington School's 62nd Annual Show Is One in a 'Million(aire)'

By CHRISTIE STORMS
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD — If you ever questioned how knowledge attained while growing up in Westfield might be put to good use one day, the Washington School Players' 62nd annual show, *Believe*, provided the answer. Actually, many answers, as this past weekend's performance employed a quiz-show-style format to tell the fictitious story of a brave Westfield High School (WHS) student.

Writer Julie Shanebrook's clever script focused on the plight of Abigail Rhoades and her efforts to prevent a smarmy real-estate developer (played by Ms. Shanebrook's husband, Joshua Wein) from converting Mindowaskin Park into a gated active-adult community.

From the moment the Westfield mayor (Rich Elbert) announced the impending park closure and was subsequently bombarded with questions by a "Westfield Leader reporter" (Kip Brindle), it was apparent Abigail (Lani Lipkind) had moxie. She quickly hatched a plan to raise enough money to stop the real-estate transaction by becoming a contestant on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?"

"I was inspired by [the movie] *Slumdog Millionaire*," Ms. Shanebrook said of her self-proclaimed "rookie"

(Jonathan Fishman), "Flashback Abigail" (portrayed by the scriptwriter herself) revisited memories that included Westfield firefighters, the Memorial Pool and the WHS prom.

The "Millionaire" producer and stage manager (Mark Parmelee and Ralph Venturino) sought to undermine and disqualify Abigail, but her family and friends provided constant support and faith in her, which ultimately led to her success.

Lively musical numbers incorporated by music director Mitch Slater highlighted the fast-paced show, including a spirited version of "Don't Stop Believin'" inspired by the television



series, "Glee."

Performers often danced into the auditorium's aisles and additionally tossed neon Glo-sticks and inflatable balls into the crowd.

Washington School Principal Andrew Perry and teachers donned Mozart-style wigs to the delight of students in the audience during the rous-

But it was the show's traditional men's number that received the most shouts of "Encore!" on Friday night. This year, students' dads donned black tank tops and silver sequined mini-skirts to sashay to Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)."

And no Washington School Show would be complete without its trademark "muck and mire" quotes, this year exchanged in a cameo by co-directors Charlie Bowman and Janet Sarkos.

This was Ms. Sarkos' first experience directing and her last of nine years with the show, which has served as the school's largest fundraiser since 1948.

Parents handled every aspect from writing, directing, producing and performing to choreography, instrumental music and set design for the event held annually at Roosevelt School.

Carl Pansini, who co-produced with Joe Ascione, Linda Habgood and Mary Claire Givelbar, said the majority of profits are turned over to the Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO) to fund assemblies and student activities as well as purchase items such as Smart Boards and laptops for the school.

He said planning for the annual January production begins as early as February. They select a script in the spring and later perform an entertaining sample scene during the PTO's Fall Social to entice fellow parents to join in the fun.

This was Mr. Pansini's first year with the show, and he also performed in the couples' dance to the B52's "Love Shack" with his wife, Suzanne.

Ms. Shanebrook, Ms. Sarkos and Mr. Pansini all expressed their appreciation for the incredible hard work and cooperation from nearly 175 volunteers.

As an added twist this year, the entire cast and crew took the stage after the final curtain to perform the "Jai Ho" dance from *Slumdog Millionaire*. Students in the audience stood up to join in as their enthusiastic teachers had taught them the dance steps during lunch hours the past few weeks.

"I think everybody wants a piece of it," Ms. Shanebrook said. "Whether you're on stage or selling t-shirts or tickets...to be involved is gold."

Ms. Sarkos reflected that the most "striking thing" she and her husband, George, who has been stage manager the past seven years, noticed throughout the decade is how little the show has changed.

"Different personalities may create a little bit of a different feel each year, but it is what it is," Ms. Sarkos said. "It isn't Broadway, but we love it. It's our thing."



Courtesy of co-director Charlie Bowman

A LITTLE HELP FROM OUR FRIENDS...The Washington School Players donned Beatles-inspired attire to perform "With a Little Help from My Friends" during the 62nd annual show fundraiser, *Believe*. The story centered around a Westfield High School student who becomes a contestant on "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?" to raise money to save Mindowaskin Park. The faith and support of her family and friends help make her a winner.

attempt at scriptwriting. "It's the whole concept of having a contestant on a game show generate answers through flashbacks of real-life experiences."

So, while present-day Abigail sweated it out against the devious (and, at times, hilarious) television host

ing rendition of Falco's "Rock Me, Amadeus."

The choreography of blank-faced "zombies" to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" and precision hip-hop dance moves during Flo Rida's "Right Round" were remarkable.

Author Helps Get To The Heart of Anger

BERKELEY HEIGHTS — Author Janet Pfeiffer will hold a book signing on Wednesday, February 10, at 7 p.m. at the Berkeley Heights Public Library, located at 290 Plainfield Avenue in Berkeley Heights.

Ms. Pfeiffer will be available to sign copies of her anger-management book, "The Secret Side of Anger: The Quickest and Easiest Guide (Ever!) to Managing Anger."

Ms. Pfeiffer reveals in the book that anger itself is not the real issue. It is triggered by underlying emotions and problems that need to be addressed first.

Employing a sarcastic, lighthearted approach, she provides simple, yet effective, techniques that anyone can use to confront and release angry feelings that might be on the verge of destroying lives.

For more information, contact Jim Miller at (888) 361-9473 or jim@tatepublishing.com.



TELLING A TALE...Local celebrity of the racetrack "Champagne" Charlie (David Christopher) entertains his daughter, Mary, (Barbara Guidi) with another of his wildly exaggerated tales.

The Stakes Are High At Alliance Repertory Theater

By SUSAN MYRILL DOUGHERTY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

RAHWAY — There's a legend at Monmouth Racetrack that a man nicknamed "Paper Bag Pete" appears at the track once a week, places a single bet, wins a bundle and takes home his winnings in a paper sack.

There's no "Paper Bag Pete" at Alliance Repertory Theater in Union County Performing Arts Center (UCPAC), but there is someone just as colorful in *The Champagne Charlie Stakes*. Charlie is a lovable chap at the racetrack who's the engine that pushes the Bruce Graham two-act play about relationships, secrets and reality.

Charlie — wearing a bone-colored straw hat, a Hawaiian shirt, plaid pants, a beige jacket and socks with his sandals — is a man who dreams. Sometimes, his dreams are based on sheer fantasy, and sometimes, they caress possibility. "Charlie multiplies

everything," says his wife, "except his age." He exaggerates, prevaricates slightly and then smiles enigmatically about his stories.

"They love me," Charlie tells his family one afternoon at the racetrack. And they do. "Champagne Charlie," as his friends and acquaintances call him, is in for a day that he will long remember.

His wife, in a wheelchair because of an impending hip replacement, wants to make it his perfect day at the races. His friend and bookie middle man Jackie (John Correll) has arranged for the sixth race to be named after Charlie.

In celebration of that event, Charlie totes his private bottle of champagne, enters the "Best Body" contest for senior citizens and plays host for his wife Mary Lee (Noreen Farley), their adult daughter Mary (Barbara Guidi) and her boyfriend Paul (Chess Lankford).

With a roll of Benjamin Franklins in his pocket and a race boasting his name, Charlie is riding high.

He places \$2 bets in the first few races, losing every one. As the sixth race — his race — approaches, however, Charlie feels especially lucky and wants to bet his entire pocketful of money that he's been squirreling away for years.

The monumental bet he's about to make, he tells Jackie, is "a sure thing" because the horse's name is "Charlie's B.Q." He's positive it stands for "beauty queen," a reference to his daughter, Mary, who was a runner-up in a beauty contest.

When he tells his wife that he's about to bet the "whole shebang" on the underdog, she encourages him to get their daughter's blessing on his foolhardy plan.

The storyline isn't particularly impressive. The characterization, direction and acting are.

It's the relationships of the characters that bring poignancy to the show. Mr. Correll's Jackie, complete with brow-mopping, everyday mannerisms, rings true to life. With precise timing and his signature deadpan delivery, Mr. Correll knows how to milk each of the comedic lines he's been handed by the playwright. Yet, when he speaks to Charlie and Mary about their longtime friendship, the rough edges around this guy turn to mush.

Noreen Farley handles the role of the mother with her characteristic finesse. The private moments, when Charlie dances with Mary Lee in the wheelchair and when he kneels down to whisper a truth in her ear, Ms. Farley and Mr. Christopher reveal depth and understanding of those characters that have lived together as one for 53 years.

Well known to local and regional theater, David Christopher in the role of Charlie slips into this — and any character he plays — like he's slipping into a comfortable pair of well-worn loafers.

Effortlessly, Mr. Christopher's portrayal of the title character is both paradoxically comic and tragic. His Charlie is the optimistic underdog of the sixth race of life who is sure this time he'll be the winner. We're rooting for him all the way and hope that "the fix" isn't in this time.

Rounding out the cast are Barbara Guidi and Chess Lankford, whose honest moments together echo the need for all people to feel a sense of belonging.

Director Michael Driscoll has given the small black box theater of Alliance Repertory Theater three staging areas, utilizing the intimate space wisely for this production. He has exacted performances from his actors that make a forgettable play worth remembering.

The show runs weekends through February 13, at 8 p.m. with 3 p.m. Sunday matinees.

Paulo Pinho Performs At First Friday Series

WESTFIELD — The New First Friday Music Series at Galeria West Art Gallery welcomes Paulo Pinho and Friends on Friday, February 5, at 7 p.m.

Mr. Pinho and Friends will present the romantic bossa nova and samba from Brazil. This music genre from Brazil has been popular throughout the world since the late 1950's to the present.

Proceeds from each event benefit theatrical programming efforts at TEATRO Si, a 501(c)3 New Jersey nonprofit corporation. For reservations and information, call the TEATRO Si box office at (908) 301-9496. For more information, visit the events page at TeatroSi.com.

Filmmakers Symposium Celebrates 20th Anniversary

MOUNTAINSIDE — Starting February 22, the 20th Anniversary Filmmakers Symposium Spring Series will run for 12 weeks at two New Jersey theatres: AMC Loews, Mountainside and AMC Loews, Monmouth Mall. The series has hosted 1,361 movie premieres, with 901 live guest appearances, over the past 19 years.

Oscar winners and nominees Danny Aiello, Alan Arkin, James Cromwell, Ethan Hawke, Viggo Mortensen, Chazz Palminteri and David Strathairn have joined Famke Janssen, Joseph Gordon-Levitt, David Morse, Joe Pantoliano and Kevin Smith as guest speakers who have come to share their insights with Symposium participants.

"The program will always be flexible in order to take advantage of opportunities as they arise," said Symposium Director Chuck Rose. "Wonderful surprises and fantastic celebrities can pop up out of nowhere, so I try to keep the schedule as fluid as possible."

In the past two years, the series has premiered 65 films that later earned a total of 17 Oscar, 25 Spirit, 17 British Academy and 27 European Film Award nominations.

Confirmed films and those under consideration for the upcoming series include *City Island* with Andy Garcia, Julianna Margulies, director Raymond de Felitta; *\$5 A Day* with Christopher Walken, Alessandro Nivola, director Nigel Cole; *The Good Heart* with Brian Cox, Paul Dano, director Dagur Kari; *Jack Goes Boating* with Philip Seymour Hoffman, Amy Ryan, director Philip Seymour Hoffman; *L'Affaire Farewell* with Emir Kusturica, Willem Dafoe, director Christian Carion; *Last Night* with Keira Knightley, Sam

Worthington, director Massy Tadjedin; *Margaret* with Anna Paquin, Matt Damon, director Kenneth Lonergan; *Mother* with Bin Won, Hye-ja Kim, director Joon-ho Bong; *Ondine* with Colin Farrell, Stephen Rea, director Neil Jordan; *Tree of Life* with Brad Pitt, Sean Penn, director Terrence Malick; and *The Yellow Handkerchief* with William Hurt, Kristen Stewart, director Udayuan Prasad.

The series is open to anyone, but seating is limited, so early enrollment is advised. Subscription is \$171 for six weeks or \$309 for 12 weeks. Discounts will be available for early registration.

Also being offered is a "Bring Your Friends" special: for each friend who signs up, an existing subscriber gets \$50 off his or her subscription for 12 weeks (or \$25 off for six weeks); or a subscriber can bring four friends and his or her subscription is free.

Spending time on both coasts, Mr. Rose has authored 24 screenplays, directed *Vietnam Vets* starring Danny Aiello, worked in the story department at Orion Pictures, served as a contributing editor at "Movies USA" and written feature articles on the film industry for *The Hollywood Reporter*.

He has held faculty positions at Seton Hall University, Adelphi University and New School University, where he developed a program in Film Script Analysis adopted by executives at HBO, ABC and many independent production companies.

Currently, Mr. Rose has a World War II drama, *Changing My Religion*, under development.

For information or to register, call (800) 531-9416 or visit PrivateScreenings.org.



20 MORE FILMS IN YEAR 20...*The Yellow Handkerchief*, starring William Hurt and Kristen Stewart, and 20 more not-yet-released movies will premiere in the 20th year of Filmmakers Symposium in the spring 2010 series, beginning in February at AMC Loews Mountainside and AMC Loews Monmouth Mall.

Westfield Symphony Orchestra

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