

Opportunities in Theatre Flourish At WYACT,

By MICHELLE H. LePOIDEVIN
Specially Written for This Is Westfield

If all of the world is a stage, as William Shakespeare suggested, then Westfield's diverse theatrical ensembles certainly provide the community with a world of limitless opportunities.

Some of the best local talent can be found within the Westfield Young Artists' Cooperative Theatre, the Westfield Community Players, and the Westfield High School Drama Department.

Since 1992, WYACT has given young and hopeful actors in the community the opportunity to pursue and foster a passion for the theater by providing free training and the chance to perform in several noteworthy productions.

Cynthia Meryl, who established WYACT, is a 30-year veteran of theater and television. Currently, she instructs Professional Acting and Musical Theatre classes at the Westfield School of Dance in Westfield. She gives private voice instruction, and also teaches five levels of acting and two levels of music theater.

Since its inception, the WYACT family's various cast and crew members have delighted audiences with 10 summer productions. These have included *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1992), *Carnival* (1993), *Stage Door* (1994), *Camelot* (1995), *Fiorello!* and *Crimes of the Heart* (1996), *Merrily We Roll Along* and *The Children's Hour* (1997) and last year's *Isn't It Romantic*.

In the summer of 1998, a WYACT cast of 56 actors and an orchestra of 26 delivered seven sold-out performances of *Carousel* at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJ PAC) in Newark.

The NJPAC performance provided WYACT with statewide recognition. Forty percent of the participants were from Westfield, Fanwood and Scotch Plains, while 60 percent were from other diverse communities. WYACT provided core leadership for actors from other towns to become involved.

As part of its action-packed schedule, WYACT has been invited back by popular demand to perform *Oliver!* during NJPAC's 1999 summer season.

The NJPAC performance, which has been a remarkable addition to the résumés of WYACT actors, is not the only upcoming honor for the theater company.

Following the *Oliver!* performance, WYACT will participate in this summer's Arts Incubator Festival at Kean University in Union, which will feature a mixture of many theater groups from New

Jersey, such as the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn.

Ms. Meryl stated that she is proud of the networking and collaboration that will be involved in the Festival, rather than the competition which normally occurs between theater groups.

Honing one's acting skills and talents is truly a full-time job at WYACT. Ms. Meryl explained that the actors cannot commit themselves to other activities because WYACT occupies them for eight hours per day.

"It is run for kids who want to be professional," stressed Ms. Meryl, who was named Best Director in 1996 by Worrall Newspapers.

A unique performance of a Three-Penny Opera is on tap from WYACT professionals. According to Ms. Meryl, this type of production is "tongue-in-cheek" and makes fun of the

and "very dark," and makes fun of the bourgeoisie.

"The kids have been dying to do it," she stated.

Auditions for the Three-Penny Opera will be held on Saturday, May 1, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. in the Vaughn-Eames Building at Kean University in Union.

Since there is no fee to participate in WYACT, members bear the responsibility of raising funds for their own productions through car washes, program ad sales, canister drives, and an event called a "Cabaret."

This year's "Cabaret" is slated for Saturday, April 24, at the Cranford Dramatic Club, and will be based on the theme "Comedy Tonight." Past productions have featured themes ranging from Shakespearean to pre-1950 theatrical favorites.

Generous donations from the Westfield Foundation, the Westfield Service League, and the Union County Division of Cultural and Heritage Affairs contribute to the group's fundraising efforts. Ms. Meryl noted.

The Paper Mill Playhouse and Plays in



SPIRITED PERFORMANCE... Carl Barber-Steele, left, performs with Stuart Hershkowitz, right, in the Westfield Community Players' 1998 production of *I'm Not Rappaport*.

the Park donate costumes and props for WYACT productions, while the Westfield Community Players, the First Baptist Church of Westfield, Dance Horizons, the Westfield School of Dance, and the Westfield "Y" lend the group a hand with space for rehearsals.

WYACT participants would like to have their own theater, rehearsal studios, and storage areas in the near future.

Looking down the road in 10 years, Ms. Meryl said that she would like to continue to provide opportunities for emerging talent.

She added that it is significant that WYACT provides professional level programs, presents rare productions that are not commonly offered to the community, and performs on a more consistent basis.

Ms. Meryl explained that WYACT is on its way to becoming the first youth state theater of its kind.

"It's professional. It's a lot of fun, a definite learning experience," revealed Marc Bertha, who performed in *Isn't It Romantic* and portrayed Scrooge's nephew in the most recent production of *A Christmas Carol*.

He added that the instruction and training he receives from Ms. Meryl is strong, effective and incomparable.

"Your performance is better because of it," he concluded.

Becoming involved with the WYACT theater company is just a telephone call away, according to Ms. Meryl. Interested individuals may call (908) 233-3200.

The Westfield Community Players (WCP), which was founded in 1934, is



GODSPELL... The cast from the March 1999 performance of *Godspell* by the Westfield High School Drama Department.

Community Players, WHS Drama Department

one of the oldest operated theaters in the area.

For 64 years, the group's cast and crew members have kept communities entertained with assorted productions of drama, comedy, fantasy and other genres.

Victor Cenci, Publicity Director of the WCP, revealed that he believes "consistency in quality" is one aspect of the theatrical troupe that is truly unique.

"We are one of the oldest, continually operating theater groups in the state," Mr. Cenci stated. He added that the WCP has brought approximately 185 productions to its stage.

"We've been a part of the community for a long time," he observed. He cited *Romeo and Juliet*, which was directed by Hank Glass, and *A Little Night Music* as two of the most notable WCP productions.

Productions during WCP's 1998-1999 season have included *Blythe Spirit* in October and November and *Prelude to a Kiss* in January. Coming up is *Rocket to the Moon*, due in March, and *Run for Your Wife*, which will be held in May and June.

Mr. Cenci noted that approximately 750 to 1000 people typically fill the seats at a WCP production. Shows are held at the company's theater at 1000 North Avenue, and productions usually last from five to seven evenings.

"The thing that sets us apart is that we have our own theater. We do everything in one place," he explained.

"The volunteers are the core of everything we do," the Publicity Director added.

The myriad of WCP committees represent all aspects of a theatrical production, including ushers, hospitality, publicity, lighting and technical experts, prop providers and coordinators and set decorators.

To become a part of any cast at the WCP, open auditions do not require membership. However, Mr. Cenci stated that if an actor is cast in a production, he or she will be asked to become a member of the theater.

He explained that proceeds from a season's productions provide the bulk of the theater's funding. In addition, a musical evening of song and dance is organized as a fundraiser. Sales of program advertisements and generous donations from the Union County Department of Cultural and Heritage Affairs also keep

the theater bustling with activity.

Looking down the road, Mr. Cenci revealed that he would like to be assured that the WCP can sustain itself, and said he hopes to see the number of new memberships increase.

He stated he would also like to see an improvement in the physical makeup of the theater.

The Westfield High School Drama Department, which is spearheaded by Laura Russo, performed *Marvin's Room* in the fall of 1998, with more than 50 students included in the cast and crew.

The production, which required elaborate sets with several costume changes, was supported in large part by a student-run candy bar fundraiser.

The drama department's performance



CAMELOT... Westfield Young Artists' Cooperative Theatre (WYACT) has been known for several distinguished productions since its inception in 1992. *Camelot*, performed in 1995, featured Daniel Wheeler as Lancelot and Robyn Lee as Lady Guinevere.

last month of Westfield High School's spring musical, *Godspell*, featured a cast of 36 and a crew of 15 students. This show required only one set, with fewer costume changes.

For the *Godspell* performances, students sold advertisements for the play's program, or playbill. They also utilized the money from the *Marvin's Room* production.

Ms. Russo reported that students deliver a monologue to audition for roles. To become a member of the production's chorus, prospective singers must prepare and perform a song. Finally, those stu-

dents who are interested in the hammer-and-nails end of a production as crew members must complete applications.

When questioned about the importance of the Drama Department at Westfield High School, Ms. Russo revealed: "I think it has a very big role. A big number of students (who are involved) are going to be doing this as a career."

To climb the ladder of success as a professional actor or actress-in-training, Westfield High School students may begin their acting career by selecting Drama I, Drama II, and Drama III.

During their senior year, the students may choose to participate in an independent study.

Ms. Russo stated that several drama students take advantage of additional theatrical opportunities by becoming involved in WYACT, the Cranford Dramatic Club and other theater groups beyond their high school environment.

She added that the young thespians

also perform two one-act plays in the Bucks County Playhouse Competition in New Hope, Pennsylvania.

According to Ms. Russo, in the New Jersey Governor's Awards High School Theatre Festival, Westfield's drama students placed third out of 17 schools statewide.

"The arts are very well supported by the administration, many staff members, and students and parents," stated Ms. Russo.

Pointing to the valued support by the Westfield community, she concluded, "We continue to be successful due to their support. It is taken very seriously."



DARING DRAMA... Joe Verno and Dorcey Winant offer compelling performances in the 1997 production of *Sisters Rosensweig*, presented by the Westfield Community Players.

How to get involved...

WYACT (908) 233-3200 wyact@westfieldnj.com
WCP (908) 232-9568 players@westfieldnj.com
WHS (908) 789-4500, 550 Dorian Road, Westfield

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