

McHenry County *Living*

WS Rep: Telling Great Stories on Stage

Written by Chris Petersen | Tuesday, October 02 2012 11:48

With one successful year under its belt, Raue Center's Williams Street Repertory company aims to continue engaging the community with quality, thought-provoking theater.

Richard Kuranda, director of the Raue Center for the Arts, is no stranger to the stage. A lifetime member of the Actors Studio, he started performing at the age of 12 and served as a founder, producer and director for troupes such as Signature Theatre Co., the Eugene O'Neill Memorial Theater Center and Epic Repertory Theatre Co. However, that was all in the New York City region, more or less the heart of American theater.

Six years ago, Kuranda moved to Crystal Lake and joined Raue Center. When Raue Center's board was looking to increase engagement from the community, Kuranda had the idea to create Williams Street Repertory (WS Rep). As the company's founding artistic director, Kuranda had experience establishing successful theater companies in the past, but the question remained: Was there the interest and the talent to create one in McHenry County?

So far, the answer appears to be a resounding "yes," as WS Rep has drawn the curtain on its second season with a production of "The Fantasticks" in September. Kuranda said getting the idea off the ground was not without its share of challenges, but it wouldn't have been possible without the enthusiastic support of the community and the level of talent in the area. "We just want to tell great stories that will provoke emotions," he said. "I am thrilled that the board of directors under Matthew Turk's guidance, has helped build this unification."

Building WS Rep

To help him build WS Rep into a full-fledged professional troupe, Kuranda turned to an old friend, producing director T. Paul Lowry. Having worked together numerous times in the New York and Connecticut theater scenes, Kuranda and Lowry already had a rapport that served them well as they gathered talent for WS Rep. The two scouted local talent through a monthly series of literary readings. The series, now known as Get Lit(erary), continues every third Thursday of the month at the European market café Le Petit Marche across the street from Raue Center at 19 N. Williams St.

"Early on, the numbers weren't large ... but the quality was really there," Lowry said. "Everybody that was walking through there were all really good."

One of those early auditions was by Amy Ferraro, a Crystal Lake native and Wauconda resident who attended an early reading before Lowry moved to the area. She said she was impressed by the credentials Kuranda brought to the table. "He seemed very knowledgeable and experienced and very excited about the whole prospect of starting a repertory theater at the Raue," she said.

Ferraro has been performing practically all her life, having been involved in children's theater in Crystal Lake as a young girl. Her parents were heavily involved in the Woodstock Opera House, where she performed with her father in a 1977 production of "The Music Man." A graduate of Illinois State University's theatre program, Ferraro has performed in various productions throughout the Chicago area.

Lowry said having a core of talented people like Ferraro made it easier for WS Rep to fill out its roster, but the company is made up of core of people with a range of experience levels. "As a company, we're made up of people who haven't done this before all the way to the seasoned veteran who just happens to live in our neighborhood," Lowry said.

Lowry said putting the company together was something of an abstract challenge because the expectations were not as fully developed in McHenry County compared to New York City. Professional theater, he said, was something most people in the community knew about, but were not overly familiar with. "Everybody knows what a football team is supposed to look like, or a school band," Lowry said. "We really didn't know exactly how [WS Rep] was supposed to look and everybody was coming to it with different expectations."

Finding the Right Productions

To determine the slate of shows for WS Rep's inaugural season, Kuranda said he conducted focus groups with community members and also looked at the types of shows that were historically successful at Raue Center. Kuranda said the first season's shows mainly were selected for their broad appeal, including a Halloween-season production of "The Rocky Horror Show," which is returning for WS Rep's second season this October.

Ferraro played multiple roles in WS Rep's original production of "The Rocky Horror Show," and although she says the sometimes-racy show may have been a bold choice to introduce the company to the community, it did bring a new crowd to Raue Center that may not have given theater a chance otherwise. "This year it's going to be very interesting in terms of how it sells," she said.

The open-mindedness of the community has been a significant comfort to WS Rep in its fledgling years, Kuranda said. Before WS Rep staged its first official production, the company solicited donations during the literary readings series, and Kuranda said he was surprised that a reading of a relatively unknown work, "Madagascar" by J.T. Rogers, brought in about \$2,000 in donations and added 100 names to the company's mailing list. Normally, he said, theater patrons are reluctant to spend money on new productions, but he took the success of the "Madagascar" reading as proof that patrons in McHenry County are open to seeing new things from American playwrights.

That openness has played a major role in helping WS Rep establish itself in a relatively short time, and Kuranda said he is grateful for the audience it has. "The most challenging component is really the audience cultivation," he said. "I am thankful for my board and staff, especially Melissa Thomfohrda, director of marketing —she has done an amazing job."

Regional Prospects

Now that the company has built a growing following in the Crystal Lake area, Kuranda said he wants to see WS Rep draw from the entire Chicago area and become more of a regional theater. "We're trying bigger and bigger shows," he said, adding that WS Rep wants to expand its shows to full six-week runs within five years. "We think we can do it."

More importantly, it seems as if WS Rep already has accomplished its original goal to foster greater engagement between Raue Center and the community. Kuranda said the company has been collecting feedback from the community since the beginning. "You always have to listen to your audience — that's the most important thing," he said. "It's about building a dialogue.

"I always know we're doing a great job when I walk down Williams Street and I see the audience talking with the actors at local eateries or over a drink," he added.

>> For more, visit www.wsrep.org and like on Facebook: www.facebook.com/WSRep.

Upcoming WS Rep Shows

- "The Rocky Horror Show," opening Friday, October 19 (through October 27) — The inspiration for the cultclassic movie, "The Rocky Horror Show" is the story of the deranged alien mad scientist Dr. Frank-N-Furter and the kinky experiments he conducts on a young couple.
- "It's a Wonderful Life — A Radio Play," opening Friday, November 23 (through December 15) — The familiar story of George Bailey is staged as a radio play, with the antics of the harried radio cast and crew adding an extra layer of humor.
- "Company," opening Friday, February 1 (through February 16) — Featuring music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, "Company" tells the story of a single man who turns to his married friends for help in understanding the institution of marriage.

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