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## Williams Street Rep overcomes rocky road

Williams Street Repertory culminates four years of “research and development” Friday, when it launches its first production at the Raue Center for the Arts in Crystal Lake.

“The Rocky Horror Show” continues at 8 p.m. Saturday and Oct. 27, 28 and 29; and again at midnight Oct. 29. But understanding how far this group has come requires “doing the Time Warp” first.

When Richard Kuranda became executive director of the Raue in 2007, creating an in-house theater company was among his goals. Years of focus groups and feasibility studies preceded the hiring of T. Paul Lowry in September 2010.

Lowry, producing director for the Raue and Williams Street Repertory, had crossed paths with Kuranda at the Epic Repertory Theatre Company in New York City, which Kuranda co-founded in 2001. Lowry, who oversaw production and lighting at the Epic Rep, demonstrated his ability to wear multiple hats. He also demonstrated his passion for innovation.

“We actually come from two different places in theater,” Lowry said of Kuranda. “He has a more traditional education and is interested in the classics. I like contemporary pieces. But we both love new pieces. We both worked at the [Eugene] O’Neill Theater Center [in Waterford, Conn.], which was all about new theater development. We love original works, and we would start doing them right away if we thought the audience was there.”

Lowry left New York for the Long Warf Theatre in New Haven, Conn. – first to serve as company manager and later as associate producer. Simultaneously he became creative director of the New Haven Theater Company from 2004-10.

“While I was there, I wanted to experiment with different styles of audience development and different avenues of storytelling. What is it? How do I get more people into it? What wants to make someone want to go to a live performance?” Lowry said.

“This is what theater is. This is the characteristic of it. ... I had to re-create it from the ground up. There wasn’t anything there, simply a name. I had to reincorporate, create a brand.”

Lowry majored in theatrical production at Arizona State University, with an emphasis on directing, Lowry considers himself a jack of all trades – from set design to wiring. As producing director for the Raue, he is in charge of its production and technical departments, as well as interacting with performers.

“It’s a little overwhelming at times, but I try and pace myself and stay organized as much as I possibly can,” he said. “I feel like afterwards we’re on top of it. It always comes together in the end.”

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Williams Street Repertory represents a philosophical shift for the Raue, from performing arts center to a producing organization. “Williams Street Rep is that producing element,” Lowry said. “We also produce local groups and coproduce, such as with Judith Svalander Ballet’s ‘The Passionate Frida.’ ”

“Williams Street Rep is an offshoot of the Raue, created by theater and arts lovers in the community,” Lowry said. “Organizations like ours grow from an artist impulse or community impulse. We want the community impulse. ... We wanted to be a place where the community can participate.”

WSR launched officially this year, but Lowry acknowledged the Raue was a “testing ground in the research and development process.” Would audiences embrace new ideas such as improvisational acting, a comic cafe; workshops in dance, film and theater? Would people set aside preconceived notions about home-grown theater?

“One of my disappointments in the theater community is we often times pigeonhole people into being a large and costly regional theater with all of the trappings of that or a low-budget, low-expectation community theater,” Lowry said. “Our aim is to create a merger of the two. Philosophically that is how we’re approaching Williams Street. ... By creating our own work we can manage the costs much better and control the product a lot better. When you bring in outside groups it limits what you’re doing.”

Equally satisfying for Lowry is the opportunity to reach new generations of actors, drawing from area high schools, McHenry County College and other area community colleges.

“It’s a build-it-and-they-will-come type of thing,” he said. “The company is growing out of original Raue programming, such as the ‘Page to Stage’ [dramatic reading] and Get Lit [a monthly series with short stories]. We’re finding fertile ground, community support from the average citizen on the street. ...

“I don’t know what this is going to look like in five years. We want the audience to be participatory in this conversation,” Lowry said. “The artistic vision is something that will evolve during the first few seasons as we learn what is commercially viable. ... We want there to be a dialogue. What do they want to see?”

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