

A CLEAR VISION



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

"Storming Heaven: The Musical," presented by West Virginia Public Theatre, is based on Denise Giardina's novel of the same name.

WVPT wants to bring diverse theater offerings to audiences

BY LINDSEY FLEMING
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The world premiere of "Storming Heaven: The Musical" marks more than just the start West Virginia Public Theatre's summer season. The production, based on Mountain State author Denise Giardina's novel of the same name, represents a turning point for the nonprofit theater company.

Since restructuring four years ago, when WVPT partnered with West Virginia University's College of Creative Arts, artistic director Jerry McGonigle said the organization has worked "just to get things moving, and we began to get a clearer vision of who we want to be. Last summer, we had a fun family musical and 'A Hatful of Rain,' which put a human

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"THEATER CAN GET SNOOTY AND ELITIST. I DON'T WANT TO BE THAT THEATER. I WANT TO REACH OUT TO DIFFERENT DEMOGRAPHICS. I BELIEVE EVERYBODY CAN HAVE A GOOD TIME AND TAKE SOMETHING FROM IT."

Jerry McGonigle
WVPT artistic director

TO ATTEND

"Storming Heaven: The Musical" is set for 7:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday. "The 39 Steps" is set for 7:30 p.m. June 26-29 and 2 p.m. June 30. All performances will be in the Gladys G. Davis Theatre at the WVU Creative Arts Center. "Storming Heaven" is recommended for ages 12 and older, and "The 39 Steps" is recommended for ages 10 and older. Tickets are \$25, with discounted tickets (\$15) available for children 17 and younger and for groups of 10 or more. Tickets are available for purchase online through Ticketmaster, by calling 293-SHOW (7469), or at the CAC or Mountainlair box offices. Info: wvpublictheatre.org.

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face on the opioid crisis. So I think we're arriving at how we want to serve the community and what we bring to the table.

"This year is a great example. We have a musical that we're doing that is deeply steeped in West Virginia tradition and has subjects, like labor relations, that stimulate conversation."

That's followed by "The 39 Steps," a whodunit based on a 1915 novel by John Buchan and a 1935 film by Alfred Hitchcock, which is set for June 26-30.

When winter rolls around, WVPT will present "A Charlie Brown Christmas" as its holiday show.

McGonigle said that mix is meant to draw as many people to the theater as possible, and eventually WVPT would like to offer a wider-ranging season in the summer.

"Handling the financial re-emergence though, we have to be fiscally responsible, which is why we are doing what we're doing right now. But we want to institutionalize the idea of encouraging new works, so that people can look forward to that. We want that buzz."

"Storming Heaven," for instance, first appeared at the Creative Arts Center as a staged reading, which the company and creators were able to transform into a full-blown production in a matter of months.

Though the turnaround will likely not be so quick next time, as it was "a killer to get organized in time," after the success of "Storming Heaven" McGonigle is eager to keep the process alive.

"That was a new step," he said. "We had writers from New York and composers from Nashville and actors from around the country and the region. This is a place that is willing to welcome artists. We will always have something new in the hopper for production in the future."

And Mia Walker, a director based in New York who helmed "Storming Heaven," thinks it's a winning recipe.

"The audience has been really engaged. They leapt to their feet," she said of the end of a recent performance. "They've connected with the material



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Actors perform a scene in "Storming Heaven: The Musical" Saturday.

and I'm incredibly proud of the cast. This is a new show that's never been staged before. ... I think the best stories are stories being developed by real people. It's important that work be developed all around the country not just in New York City.

"I think what WVPT is doing is on the right track. They support the work and resources and support the artists coming in from other places as well as giving opportunities to those here."

"It's a great thing bringing people in, but I also am advocating for local artists. For 'Storming Heaven' we have a mix of local actors, technicians and designers," McGonigle said.

Veteran actor Tim McGeever, a New York City transplant who has performed on Broadway and TV and now resides with his wife Nancy McNulty in Pittsburgh, enjoys the process of working with actors just getting started.

He and McNulty are both cast in "The 39 Steps" — the first time they've worked together since meeting on a show 15 years ago.

"We'll celebrate our 10 year anniversary during rehearsals, so on a personal level it's exciting," he said. "And professionally, so far, we've had a really good experience. It's an interesting setup. It's been awhile since I've worked with actors who are students at the beginning of their professional careers. It harkens back to an earlier time in theater, when if you wanted to be an actor you would

become an apprentice and learn by watching and understudying. ... I've found in my career when you work with more advanced actors it causes you to raise your game. And being on stage and present in the moment with other actors, it's always enlightening."

Like Walker, McGeever said it's also important to note that great pieces of theater come from all over.

"I think a lot of people when they think of great talent — they think of New York or Los Angeles or Chicago," he said. "But living in those cities isn't for everyone. And in the time I've been in Pittsburgh, I've done productions I'm as proud of as any shows I did on Broadway or New York."

And McGonigle said WVPT's mission is to give those kinds of shows to the audience here.

"I want us to be a mecca for people to come and practice this thing called theater," he said. "I want intermingling of all levels of artists and technicians working on new and old material that can be challenging or family friendly or a good old fashioned musical."

And just as he wants the talent and offerings to be diverse, he hopes the crowd is too.

"Theater can get snooty and elitist," he said. "I don't want to be that theater. I want to reach out to different demographics. I believe everybody can have a good time and take something from it."

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