Clackamas Repertory Theatre presents Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'Carousel'  

The Clackamas Repertory Theatre presents Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Carousel" starting Aug. 2.

(Handout photo)

Dave Sweeney, Special to OregonLive.com By Dave Sweeney, Special to OregonLive.com  
on July 29, 2014 at 9:23 PM, updated July 29, 2014 at 11:44 PM

Ok, show of hands here. How many of you have heard of The Clackamas Repertory Theatre Company? How many of those same hands have seen a production there? Why do I ask?

Well if you've lived in the Portland area for any length of time (or even if you haven't), you are likely aware of the thriving theatre community (especially musical theatre) that exists here.

From the large, national Broadway touring shows that perform at Keller, to the 60+ years of experience at the Lakewood Theatre Company in Lake Oswego, to the (minimum of) ten major, annual productions of Portland Center Stage, to the award winning Stumptown Stages, to the creative excellence of Greg Tamblyn's Pixie Dust Productions, to the wildly popular Broadway Rose Theatre company in Tigard, we are truly theatrically blessed! And that is by no means a complete list or accounting of the many fine theatre companies and community theatre groups here in the Portland area.

But of all these many, fine offerings, there is one company that may have escaped your radar (I know it did mine). That's right, The Clackamas Repertory Theatre Company.

While they are hardly newcomers to the local theatrical universe (this season marks their ten year anniversary) CRT does not seem to have the same visibility as its more popular brethren. That needs to change and for one simple reason.

The Clackamas Repertory Theatre is really good!

According to BroadwayWorld.com, the recently concluded production of The Philadelphia Story at CRT "is stunning" ... it’s a glossily entertaining evening" and the set alone "worth the price of admission." And now CRT moves on to its next production, the Rodgers & Hammerstein musical Carousel (August 2-24) which promises to be even bigger, even better. More on Carousel later.

All of this started ("more than 3,500 days ago" as their website puts it) when the then head of the theatre department at Clackamas Community College, David Smith-English, with strong support and encouragement
from the College administration, was given tremendous input into the design and construction of a new theatre building on campus. As David recalls, "My dean (Kay Slusarenko) at that point said, 'Remember, this is a theatre. It's not a multi-purpose performance space.' Make sure you don't let anybody make it into anything else."

Well, he didn't.

The space in which CRT performs is exquisite. Very reminiscent of an ancient Greek Theatre with its half circle configuration, excellent sight-lines and wonderful acoustics. What Cindy Smith-English (David's wife and CRT managing director) likes best about it is "the intimacy". As she puts it, "It's comfortable, it's small, it's beautiful." David, more specifically, likes "the way the floor draws the audience in. I like that the floor is below the seats and you can see it very well. It always becomes a design element and it's always different." All excellent points, and I would have to agree. It is a gem of a theatre.

So with a brand new theatre building arriving, a strong partnership with Clackamas Community College Foundation and a group of very talented, disciplined and determined former students, the idea for The Clackamas Repertory Theatre was born. It was and continues to be a resource for students and former students alike to experience (and be employed by) a quality, local, professional theatre company. And no, it's not just for the citizens of Clackamas. CRT draws both actors and audiences from all over the metro area and indeed the country. Hillarie Putnam, the star in the just completed CRT Philadelphia Story, is a veteran of both motion pictures and TV, most recently seen on the History Channel. Meridith Kaye Clark, star of last season's Kiss Me Kate, has played Elphaba (the green witch) in the first National touring company of Wicked. Over the last ten years, actors from throughout the Portland theatre community have graced the CRT stage.

Interestingly, and by design as well as necessity, CTR performs only in the summer. Well OK, mostly in the summer as their season stretches into early October and there are a number of "special events" staged throughout the year. Presenting an eclectic mix of offerings, each summer the season (three major productions in all) generally opens with a comedy, often a classic. Past shows have included; The Odd
Couple, Harvey and I Love You You’re Perfect Now Change. The next show is always a musical like Carousel (this August), or Fiddler on the Roof, Oklahoma or Cabaret. Finally, the last show of their short summer season is more of, to quote Cindy, "a wild card". Possibly a new show, or one that’s never been produced here in Portland, or one that’s a bit edgy or even controversial. "Something that will 'challenge' the audience," says David. For example Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, and Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot have both been past season closers. Even Shakespeare's The Tempest concluded the 2010. The closing show is always something...well, 'different'.

Occasionally there are pre-show lectures, covering some topic related to the current show, given by a few of the college professors. These lectures are very interesting and add context to the play you are about to see. In addition to the lectures, there are actor/director "talkbacks" after most Friday performances. Here the entire cast, along with the director, comes out after the show, in street clothes, and answers any and all questions from the audience. Recently I attended one of the last performances of The Philadelphia Story and I attended both the pre-show lecture and the post-show talkback. Both I found quite interesting but the talkback most of all. We're all just sitting around talking about the play. Getting the actors insights and opinions. And we are definitely encouraged to "pay attention to the 'man' behind the curtain". Cindy enjoys them because, "you get to see the actors as real people. The audience becomes more invested in the cast and show." She's right...plus it's a lot of fun!

Now, lest you think that CRT merely does three shows in the summer and then packs up until next year, au contraire! Or, as we say in TV, but wait, there's more!

While the three summer shows are the company's main entrees, there are a number of (relatively new) appetizers scattered throughout the year. These "one-evening" (and now, with the children's shows, "one day") performances provide a quite diverse number of offerings.

There are the Sunday's at Seven (aka, "cabaret") shows. Each featuring a solo artist (or small group) performing on stage for an evening. Picture Barbara Streisand at Carnegie Hall ... except with minimal accompaniment and a smaller venue. The next Sunday@7 is "An Evening with Merideth Kaye Clark" (remember Wicked and last year's Kiss Me Kate) coming August 17th. And the final "Sunday" will be Don Kenneth Mason: "Songs of a Dancin' Man", September 28th. Don came to Portland to perform in Oklahoma at Portland Center Stage...and never left.

Then there are the "Readings" (the Sunday's at Three if you will). The "Staged Play Readings." (OK, you're right, everybody hates the name. But that's what we got, so that's what we'll go with ... for now. Personally I like "CRT Unplugged" or possibly "CRT On the Edge" but I digress). The readings are complete plays performed (with scripts in hand) after only three rehearsals with minimal props, sets and costumes. These may be contemporary shows, edgy shows, or never-seen-in Portland shows, but all are interesting shows.
Both of these can be found on CRT's website: ClackamasRep.org (check Current Events).

And now comes the newest addition to the CRT's menu, Wing It. It's an interactive kids' show specifically for the little tots. Kids 2-8 years of age. There are five shows coming up during the school year the first of which will be Saturday, October 4th at 10:30am in the Osterman Theatre. Each show promises to be 'lively and participatory'. Each show will feature lots of dancing, singing and laughter. Each show will conclude with a Grand Finale Talent Show where the kids are the stars! Directed and produced by Travis Nodurft (a former Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey's circus clown and CRT Company Member), Wing It will be a delightful and memorable theatre experience for your wee ones.

Oh yea, there's also CRT's Annual Fundraising Performance. A one night, one-night only show performed in February. Last year's show was the melodrama, Dirty Work at the Crossroads, where the audience was expected to boo loudly, cheer enthusiastically, applaud uncontrollably and (drumroll here please cause this is the best part) throw peanuts at the actors! (I know right, how cool is that?!).

And that brings us full circle to this year's musical, Carousel (August 2-24). Now I've only seen a few rehearsals and I don't fancy myself a critic but that being said ... Wow! This is going to be a terrific show. Again, the set alone is worth the price of admission. There's great energy and precision, strong voices and vocal blendings, wonderful attention to detail and excellent characterizations. Some of the performances just sparkle!

Carousel, this August at The Clackamas Repertory Theatre, will be a performance well worth attending.

Discovering the theatrical gem that is CRT will be even better.

_Dave Sweeney is a musical theatre enthusiast as well as the Chief Meteorologist for OregonLive.com. Dave's video weather forecasts can be seen every day (M-F) on OregonLive.com._

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