

COVER STORY

SUMMER THEATER

An area fixture, Open Air Theater boasts new management

By DAN AUBREY
Special Writer

TITUSVILLE — M. Kitty Peace, the new general manager for the Open Air Theater at Washington Crossing State Park, hopes to make the beloved summer theater center a place that will truly allow the show to go on.

"My dream is to make it a place for performances during any weather. The performances are so good, the performers so ready, and the audiences so willing," says Peace, who marks the first major management change in the Open Air theater in more than 20 years.

The tenacious and respected Jack Rees, who has lead and managed the maturity of the 24 year-old area institution, recently decided to let a new generation step into his fairly sizeable shows.

Rees, who makes a living at IBM, has been with the theater since its birth. Peace, who has served as technical director and assistant manager for the park, was the natural selection.

Mary Rees, assistant and wife to the manager, says the Open Air Theater was born from a rainfall that flooded and washed away one of the park's dams in 1962.

WHEN THE bulldozers brought in to assist repairs flattened greenery, attention was drawn to a "natural theater."

Park Superintendent Dirk Van Dommelen, accustomed to attending outdoor theaters in his native Holland, convinced the Pennington Players to try a show under the stars. Involved in the company were Jack and Mary Rees.

That 1963 production of Shaw's "The Devil's Dilemma" drew more than 600 people and established one of the area most enduring summer family traditions.

From Broadway to opera, from the tried-and-true to the spanking new, the Open Air stage has seen them all under clear and wet skies. But that's all part of the terrain for Open Air coordinators.



The Open Air Theater in Washington Crossing will feature Shakespeare and musicals this summer.

Peace, a native Philadelphian, learned about theater and the great outdoors "down south," where, she says, open air theater is an art form.

Several years later she attended a theater convention and found an opportunity that landed her the full-time stage manager position at the Kelsey Theater of Mercer County Community College in West Windsor. That was nearly 10 years ago and her technical skills and patience became a sought after commodity by

several other area performing groups, including the Open Air.

PEACE SAID she got involved in the park when friends performed in a production of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night." She served as bit performer and assistant stage manager.

Two years ago, she served as stage manager and technical director. And last summer she assisted Rees in the general operation of the whole enterprise.

The Open Air Theater is a partnership. The principal player is the Washington Crossing Association of New Jersey, which also sponsors the park's nature and visitor centers. Within the association is a theater committee that serves as steward for showbiz activities.

The funds for the project (including the near \$90,000 for an full summer of performances) comes from the state through Parks and Services.

The Open Air general manager contracts area theater companies to provide special runs of productions. Each company is guaranteed a minimum of \$5,000. Profits in excess of that amount are split by the theater and company, with funds being circulated back into the theater development fund for next year. Yet most productions just break even, said Peace.

The uncontrolled factor in this theater machine is the weather. A good week of rain means a bad spell at the box-office, putting a drain on both enthusiasm and economy.

"LAST YEAR was hard," the new manager says. "We were rained out 10 times. But more often than not the rain lasted until the end of the show." Yet despite the rainy and "threatening" weather, which Peace says is the worst, 18,000 visitors attended the productions. The theater seats about 800 people.

"Audiences will continue during the drizzling," she says. Damage to musical instruments and the light towers, which are grounded, are the concerns brought on with inclimate weather. However, "lightning is when we stop the show."

Peace described a policy among outdoor theaters: "If you're rained out after intermission, you don't get a rain check." Peace looks forward to the day when she and the audience will see canvas shelters that could be erected over both audience and stage.

But Peace is content with the theater's recent improvements: new restroom facilities, new benches, and new lighting and sound equipment have helped the theater maintain its youth over the past few years.

To those familiar with the clash of nature at the Park, Peace says that "the frogs are gone. They dammed up the creek. And all the cicadas are in Princeton. We've miked real close and added two more microphones. The only trouble we have with bugs is with the follow spots. Bugs are attracted to them. It's cool out there."

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In Princeton, a choice between professionals and fledgling actors

By LIZ TALLON
Special Writer

PRINCETON — Two theater companies in Princeton are gearing up for the summer season: one for the first time, the other after a year's hiatus.

McCarter Theater has announced it will present two shows under the banner of "Summertime '87": Theater On The Lighter And Cooler Side." Both productions will be staged by guest professional theater companies. The installation of air conditioning has made the summer schedule possible.

According to Mary Ellen Schilling,

McCarter's communications director, the theater has wanted to produce summer shows for a long time and views this as the inaugural summer season.

While both of this year's offerings are light musical fare, Schilling said that, in the future, McCarter planned to present a variety of summer entertainment, including music and dance. "We want to use the summer season to try new things. We don't want to limit ourselves at this point."

MCCARTER'S FIRST summer production, "Peg 'O My Heart," will be staged by The American Stage Festival, a New Hampshire-based

summer theater company.

The cast includes Jan Miner, television's "Madge, the manicurist," and local favorite George Ede, who impressed McCarter audiences in last season's production of "Our Town." "Peg 'O My Heart" opens July 9th.

"Some Enchanted Evening," a musical revue of Rodgers and Hammerstein songs stars Tony Award nominee Ernestine Jackson. Jackson and a cast of five will perform songs from "South Pacific," "Oklahoma," "The King And I," and more. It opens July 30th. Both shows run Thursday through Sunday for two weekends. Subscription prices start

at \$25.20, single tickets at \$14.00. The McCarter Box Office phone is (609) 683-8000.

Princeton Summer Theater is back, after a year's absence due to renovations. This company, made up of Princeton undergraduates, McCarter regulars, and local residents, plans an ambitious summer season of four productions: "Noises Off," by Michael Frayn, Moliere's "Don Juan," "Arms And The Man," and "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Princeton Summer Theater co-director Robert Gleason explained that the shows were selected not only for their entertainment value, but for the challenge they offered

the company and the audience.

"WE WOULDN'T do a show just to sell tickets," said Gleason. "As actors, directors and producers, we want to be challenged to do good work." He added that local audiences enjoyed theater-going in the active sense, and wanted more than passive entertainment.

The company performs in the Hamilton Murray Theater on the Princeton campus. Gleason said that recent technical improvements, and a new stability in the organization have given the group the confidence to undertake the busy summer

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