

# STAGING DREAMS

## Taking The Audience Along at Rep Stage

DEBBI MACK



"We really see ourselves as doing work that says something," Valerie Costantini is talking about Rep Stage, the professional theatre "in residence" at Howard Community College that she founded seven years ago and where she serves as producer and artistic director.

Costantini, an Elkrige resident who has worked at the college for 18 years, says that plays are chosen to "span the interest of our audience, as well as stake them to new places."

Being a theatre in residence means that Rep Stage (which is not short for "repertory"—Costantini says she just liked the sound of the name) is a separately-funded entity from the college that receives some subsidies from it, such as rent-free stage space.

Howard is the only community college in the country and the only college in Maryland with an equity theatre in residence, according to Costantini. The company is also a member of both the Washington League of Theatres and the Baltimore Theatre Alliance.

Rep Stage actually has three stages: the 250-seat Smith Theatre, the 100-seat Theatre Outback, and the outdoor Dreier Stage. In addition to the four or five productions it puts on each year, Rep Stage sponsors an Actors' Summer Institute for teen and pre-teen actors and one-day workshops for adults year-round.

The company also has a "Works in Progress" play development series for new and emerging playwrights that includes first readings and workshop productions.

Rep Stage started as a community theatre 20 years ago, meaning it was almost entirely a volunteer effort.

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Five years later, it became semi-professional. In 1993, Costantini says they decided "to take the leap and pay everyone," a way of showing a greater level of commitment to the company."

The decision to convert to a professional Actors' Equity company has required a good deal of work and attention to the details. Costantini says the company must meet the requirements of a 72-page contract.

Among other things, at least 60 percent of the actors in the company must be members of the Actors' Equity Association. There's a strict limit on the hours people must work, minimum pay requirements, and even a limit on the number of seats in the house.

"It's very much a business in that regard," Costantini says. However, the move has paid off in terms of improved quality.

"When we became Equity, everything had to go up," she says. "The quality of everything rose."

"The Mystery of Irma Vep (A Penny Dreadful)" is a good example of the kind of unusual productions that one can see at Rep Stage. The play was a product of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, founded by avant-garde notable Charles Ludlam, described by Mel Gussow for the New York Times as "a grand recycler of popular culture, an entertainment ecologist, taking old tales and old movies and recharging them with his own extravagant imagination."

In a gender-bending spoof/homage, the play sends up and glorifies the "penny dreadful," a cheap Victorian novel that combined horror with the flowery language of the period, along with movies like "Wuthering Heights," "Rebecca" and "The Curse of the Mummy."

Costantini says, "It's the ridiculous and the sublime together." The production has enjoyed remarkable success, with every performance except opening night a sell-out.

"It's possible we might even break even with the show," Costantini says, which is highly-unusual in the theatre, where tickets usually bring in one-fourth of the production costs.

Two characters play six (arguably, six and a half) parts—male and female—in "Irma Vep," requiring costumes to be worn under costumes. This makes it easier for the nimble-footed actors, scampering on and offstage, to change clothes. At one point, the role changes come so fast and furious that the play lampoons stage conventions by having the actor pretend to be an off-stage character

*Continued on page 28*



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*Continued from page 27*

by way of a well-placed hand over the mouth.

Costantini says the costumes are often "dripping wet" by the end of a performance and have to be cleaned every night. Duplicates are kept on hand, in case an outfit has to be sent out for dry cleaning. Backstage, four people serve as "dressers," who also do the set changes and various on-stage effects, such as a bleeding portrait and the depiction of off-stage "camel" through the use of a moving leash and sound effects.

At one performance, a character's false teeth dropped out in mid-scene, provoking knowing laughter from the audience. Was that an accident or deliberate?

Costantini smiles. "Well," she says, drawing the word out a bit.

"He says that he doesn't do it on purpose, but I think he does."

On another night, she says that while the same actor was playing a female character, his wig fell off. The gimmick works because it's all part and parcel of the bigger joke that the audience shares, knowing that everyone is being played by two people.

But, there's much the audience doesn't know, including all of the planning goes into a stage production.

For instance, Costantini says that Rep Stage uses a "dramaturg" to research the various details of a particular play. For "Irma Vep," the dramaturg researched all the movie and other references in the play.

The actors and directors ended up spending a weekend watching all those Victorian-era movies to prepare for the show.

Another example is when the company put on "The Importance of Being Earnest," in which the setting was changed to India in 1904. The dramaturg had to find out what it would be like to live as a British national in India at that time.

Costantini says that the British tended to wear the same types of clothes, high-collared and corseted, and plant the same types of shrubs, such as rosebushes, as they would in England, which were totally inappropriate for the hot climate of India, as both the collars and the rosebushes tended to wilt. The effect of using that setting was to underscore the silliness at the heart of the Oscar Wilde play.

Costantini says in the theater business you have to be a good planner "and you have to plan very

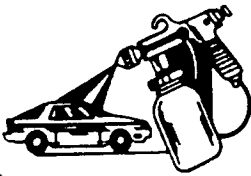
*Continued on page 30*

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Continued from page 28

early." Among the essential details to be worked out in advance are getting performance rights, which Costantini says can be more difficult for newer productions. Casting and other work has already begun on "The Philadelphia Story," which will run next season.

Rep Stage has received many honors over the years, including 14 Helen Hayes award nominations. The company has co-produced work with Olney Theatre Center, Source Theatre of Washington, D.C., Everyman Theatre of Baltimore, Signature Theatre of Arlington, and others.

One of the most memorable productions for her was "Never the Sinner," which was co-produced with Signature, then moved to the off-Broadway stage and earned the

Outer Critics' Circle Award for Best Off-Broadway show.

Costantini, who also chairs the college's Arts and Humanities Division, says she has worked in film, but the live stage holds particular appeal for her, because it is "so much more powerful, so much more immediate."

"The audience is so involved and it effects how the show goes," she says. Costantini also acts, and she remembers some intense moments when she played the sinister Nurse Ratched in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest."

Her performance was so convincing, that one woman in the audience actually got to her feet and yelled at her to stop tormenting one character. At another point, when she was going off-stage, she heard a man in the audience whisper "Bitch!" as she left.

Costantini doesn't shy away from controversy and enjoys producing work that deals with such issues as gender, race, aging, and the abuse of homosexuals, but likes to handle them in a way that is not too heavy.

For instance, even in a light-hearted production such as "Irma Vep," she notes, "in essence, you have two men kissing one another." She noticed that this produced a marked response from a group of teenagers, despite the fact that they've probably seen such things on television.

Costantini believes that the theatre is more than just entertainment.

"I see it as essential to life," she says. "We can make a real difference. We can open up eyes and minds."

"We can achieve no more than we can dream," she says. "And the arts teach us how to dream." ■



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