

AFT is working hard on - and in - shows this season

Key to the Door Weekly

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By Fred 'Doc' Heide

American Folklore Theatre Artistic Director Jeff Herbst noted recently that our season this summer centers on the theme of work. Our newest show "Victory Farm" is about German prisoners of war toiling against their will, and two major songs have "work" in the title.

Then there's "Belgians in Heaven," back for its ninth season. Roger, the character I play, spends half the show harping on his brother Leo to get him to work, and even kicks him off the farm for his repeated failures in this department.

Our third show, "Cheeseheads," takes place at a factory and features a song called "Working on the Line." So you can see we've got work on the brain.

To work or not to work

As one of the authors of "Belgians," I'll be frank. I'm ambivalent about work, of which I have too much. My work sometimes seems like an unctuous relative who's permanently camped out on the couch and is now eating all the food in the fridge. Like Roger, I fantasize of banishing it permanently.

On the other hand, I love it.

We at AFT are workaholics. Sometimes you'll find folks at our theater from 8 a.m. to midnight or later. Certain company members, like those in our orchestra, can rehearse seven days a week.

The reason we put up with this is that our work is a form of play.

The rehearsal process for "Belgians" is a great example. Lee Becker, who plays the voice of Mildred the Chicken, is constantly throwing out quips. He referred to the

scene where my character dies as “Roger Mortis.” And when I wished him luck as he was about to practice a Mildred song, he responded, “I think you mean ‘good cluck.’”

Work of the dance

The word “play” was originally Dutch, and meant “to dance and leap for joy.” Dancing is also part of our work. The hardest part of my rehearsal process is learning dance steps from Pam Kriger, our resident choreographer. When Pam tries to teach me dances, I’m tempted to say what Jeremy Irons did in the movie “Margin Call” to get an underling to describe how the financial meltdown happened: “Explain it to me as you would a child, or a golden retriever.”

A perfect blend of work and play is Colin Welford, our star music supervisor. He claims he’s been called The Ayatollah for his dedication to detail. But the other night he had all the interns laughing and singing along to 1980s pop tunes that he plunked out from memory. During the heat of rehearsals he created Verna’s Sandwich Café (named after the seagull in “Belgians”). He handed out printed menus, had us select ingredients, then made sandwiches to order from what he’d bought at the “Emporium de Piggly Wiggly.”

Robert Frost once quipped, “The brain is a wonderful organ. It starts working the moment you get up in the morning and does not stop until you get into the office.” At AFT our brains may be working overtime, but mostly it just feels like they are playing around.

See you under the stars.

AFT presents “Victory Farm” Monday and Thursdays at 8 PM, Wednesdays at 8:30 PM, and Saturday at 6 PM. “Belgians in Heaven” takes the stage Wednesdays at 6 PM and Fridays at 8 PM. “Cheeseheads: The Musical” performs Tuesdays at 8 PM and Saturdays at 8:30 PM. For information, call 920-854-6117.



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