

Valcq's Music Part of a Long AFT Connection

Key to the Door Weekly

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By Fred 'Doc' Heide

Four nights a week this summer you can hear something extraordinary on our AFT stage: an original score by James Valcq. You're probably familiar with his talents through "The Spitfire Grill", which landed at the Door Community Auditorium last fall after ranging from Off-Broadway to Korea and beyond. But James has a deeper connection to our merry band of players.

I first met James just shy of 30 years ago. In the summer of 1983 we shared the Peninsula Park stage in the Heritage Ensemble, which gave birth to AFT. Also in the troupe that year were Gerald Pelrine, the stentorian-voiced co-founder of AFT, and two strong women, Kathy Foss and Carrie Hitchcock.

Belting in the Boonies

These were years when our dressing room was the trunk of our car behind the stage. Each night James arrived hanging out the window of Kathy's back seat belting show tunes. James radiates heart, and you can see he's a guy who can liven up a party.

As was typical in the Ensemble years, we did two shows in rep. One was "Daylight in the Swamp", a tour through the folk music and lore of Wisconsin lumberjacks. James was delightfully over the top portraying a Swedish lumber mill worker who's just lost a finger ("Yumpin' yiminy, dere goes anudder von!").

But the show I most recall from that year was "Badger 49ers," the letters and songs of Wisconsinites who sought gold in California. It contained one of my all-time favorite Ensemble lines, an inscription from a sign on a muddy Gold Country byway: "This road impassable. Not even jack-assable."

Manhattan Style for Miners

Dave Peterson, the bearded UW professor who founded the Ensemble, welcomed cast members arranging music for his shows. James did so with typical flair. “California Stage”, which comically detailed the rigors of stagecoach travel, had a simple jaunty 19th century frontier tune. By the time James had his way with it, the individual harmony lines more closely resembled chants from a Nepalese monastery. But when we five sang together, it melded smooth as Manhattan Transfer.

My favorite song that summer was “The Lonely Miner”. A first-person narrative of a guy’s exploits in the gold fields, its melody was the sort that called me back to the Ensemble for 17 years. It moaned like wind across the plains. You somehow believed you’d left your family in Madison, broke your back five years panning for gold, hit rock bottom, and now could never return.

I can’t say to what extent songs like these influenced James, but the score he’s created for “Victory Farm” (with book and lyrics by Katie Dahl and Emilie Coulson) invokes emotions just as primal. The tunes call to mind hard-driving trains, German dances, dreams of a girl for a world beyond Door County. The songs are instantly memorable, lifting your soul into the deep blue sky. They’re the reason we go to musical theatre.

We at AFT are fortunate indeed to have James writing for us. You’ll be, too, when you witness this sterling production.

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.



Fred "Doc" Heide is a co-founder, playwright and performer with American Folklore Theatre.