

It all comes together through community

Key to the Door Weekly

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By Fred 'Doc' Heide

Last week in our dressing room, I heard intern Trevor Rees singing “Don’t Make Me Go Back.” It’s a song from “Belgians in Heaven” about how a soul in Limbo doesn’t want to return to Earth, but Trevor and I joked that it could apply to many of us at American Folklore Theatre this week, leaving to go back to other lives.

By the time you read this, Trevor will be in Madison, beginning his master’s program in acting at the University of Wisconsin. I’ll have snuggled into my 300-square-foot studio apartment in the hills of Berkeley, Calif., teaching graduate psychology seminars in San Francisco.

Both of us will enjoy these activities. I’m perpetually stunned at how lucky I am to have this incredible double life. As AFT actress Karen Mal once said to me, “You get to be Doc Heide.”

I love psychology, though I’d agree with an old aphorism — “Psychology presents what everybody knows in a language nobody understands.” It’s a perfect profession for a guy who can drone for hours about social constructivism but can barely figure out how use the cycles on a clothes dryer.

Berkeley on a bumper

And I love Berkeley. Each fall I’m reminded of Thoreau’s pronouncement, “Westward I go free.” It’s true. A typical Berkeley bumper sticker reads, “I’m Already Opposed to the Next War” or “I’d Rather Be Out Sick than In Sane.”

There’s a feeling of dizzying possibility there. The Berkeley campus looks like it was designed by a delegation of Greek philosophers accidentally locked in a room with a pod of NASA engineers.

Berkeley culture rocks. Every block downtown has two or three Asian restaurants. You're as likely to run into a homeless guy as a Nobel laureate — and there's a good chance you wouldn't be able to tell them apart.

And the intellectual atmosphere is unparalleled. On occasion I get to hang out with friends like Huston Smith, one of the pre-eminent religious scholars of our generation and a colleague of the Dalai Lama, Thomas Merton and Aldous Huxley.

Huston is 92, can barely hear and is so hunched over he looks like the love child of Gandalf and a female lephrachaun. But he radiates optimism like heat from a woodstove. When a friend of ours told him she wasn't a believer, Huston responded, "Oh, too bad, but God bless you anyway!"

Community of soaring souls

Yes, Berkeley is wonderful. But I've lived there for 30 years and have barely met my neighbors. As I so often express in this column, AFT is a community. Folks would pluck out their right eye for you, then make sure you didn't need the other one, too.

Much of this sense of community comes from our over 200 volunteers who devote untold hours in all kinds of weather to parking cars, running our concession stand or taking tickets.

At our annual picnic for them, I got a bit poetic and compared AFT to a jet plane. If you hauled the parts of a jumbo jet up to your rooftop and threw them off, you'd have a big pile of junk. But if you put them together in a very specific way and fueled them properly, you could wing your way to California.

AFT is like that. A small group with specific talents has come together, fueled by the enthusiasm of thousands of fans. Individually we are only wheels or windowpanes — together we soar to the stratosphere of the imagination.

May your journey be safe until we meet again, under the stars next summer.

AFT's fall season opens Thursday and runs through Oct. 14 with "Cheeseheads: The Musical" at Door Community Auditorium in Fish Creek. Also, "And If Elected" plays from Oct. 4-14 at Ephraim Village Hall. For tickets or more information, call (920) 854-6117 or go to www.folkloretheatre.com.



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