

More than just music in the orchestra pits Cheese Soup, Anyone?

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By Colin Welford

Proudly wielding your show tickets, you enter the sumptuous and gilded theatre. Slickly you are propelled down the aisle by an elegantly tuxedoed usher. Finally you plump yourself down into the cushioned satisfaction of your super-duper expensive front row orchestra seats. All is well, and the show is about to begin!

The lights go down; the curtain begins its rise as the first majestic chord of music creeps out of the vast 'orchestra pit'. You lean forward in expectancy - when suddenly your superb view of the stage is completely obliterated by a great uncontrollably bobbing and wagging shock of human hair! – Yes, Dear Patron-Of-The-Arts, you have just encountered that great theatrical annoyance, the Back Of The Head Of The Orchestra Conductor! (Hint: to avoid this obstructionist horror, never buy a front row seat when you go to the theatre!)

IF, HOWEVER, you come and see a performance of AFT's 'Cheeseheads The Musical' at the Door Community Auditorium (where I am currently conducting the musicians), I can guarantee that your experience will be entirely different! Firstly, the ticket prices (even in the front row) are ridiculously low. So low, in fact, that people say they would gladly pay a similar amount just for the opportunity to gaze solely at my head for 90 minutes - never mind a show! Then of course, we have no tuxedoed ushers. Better, we have a veritable battalion of warm-hearted local volunteers who expertly choreograph the car parking before helping you find your theatre seats at your own pace. Finally, we cannot boast a huge number of instrumentalists in the 'Cheeseheads' orchestra pit - but as I always say, what we lack in numbers we make up for in volume! The combination of talented local musicians Pat Judy (Drums) and Craig McClelland (Bass) along with myself on

keyboards creates a popping and rocking band just right for the show's catchy music by veteran composer and former 'jingle'-writer, Paul Libman.

Unfortunately, many talented musicians who labor nightly in the dark recesses of theatre 'orchestra pits' are rarely seen by the audience – their only representative is often The Back of The Head of the Orchestra Conductor, reminding the audience that the music is live and not recorded. Theatre Musicians are pretty much a species all of their own: Not only do they have to maintain a rigorously high standard of playing for some twenty or more hours of intense performances a week, they must also somehow keep sounding fresh despite the daily repetition of the very same music. So how on earth do they maintain their concentration and break this potential cycle of monotony?

Well, they have ways! For one, I've witnessed a couple of entertaining (and genuine) fistfights between un-neighborly musicians in a Broadway orchestra pit during a performance. On another Broadway production the seventeen orchestra members, to enliven the proceedings, would race out of the theatre 'en masse' during the show. They'd then dare to sprint at break-neck speed round an entire busy city block during the four-minute dialogue scene, arriving back just in the nick of time to play the next song! During one memorable performance I even saw (and smelled) a Tuba player's saucepan steaming covertly at his feet upon a portable hotplate, treating the first few rows of the audience to the distant strains of Chicken Noodle Soup...

BUT AGAIN, if you come and see 'Cheeseheads' at the DCA we won't be up to any such shenanigans – we're all INCREDIBLY professional! But I guess that unless you come to take a quick peek down at us musicians, you'll never really know, will you? If there DOES happen to be a smell of something unusual emanating from the musician's area, please don't raise the alarm – it's probably just our Cheese Soup coming to a gentle boil!

"Cheeseheads, the Musical" runs through Oct. 14 at Door Community Auditorium in Fish Creek. Also this fall, "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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