

July 15, 2009

By Doc Heide

In our 19 years of existence, AFT has had one artistic director: multi-talented Jeff Herbst.

Longtime fans know him as Slim in “Lumberjacks in Love”, or sweet-hearted Henry in “Belgians in Heaven”. This summer he’s a cantankerous fishing guide in “Muskie Love”. But Jeff’s also one of the rocks on which AFT stands. A true escarpment of a guy.

Jeff’s duties are legion. He programs seasons, hires actors and crew, locates writers and helps them develop scripts. He either directs shows (such as this summer’s “Sunsets & S’mores”) or consults on everything we present. You’ll also find him taking down sets, discussing budgets or listening sympathetically to a cast member.

The work is endless, and as he puts it, consists mainly of “phone calls, emails, and grey hairs.”

Early Involvement

Because he’s so modest, you might not know he’s been the lead in a Broadway musical or performed Off-Broadway. That doesn’t seem to matter to Jeff, who “gets” AFT in his very bones. This traces back to his friendship with Fred Alley, whom he met in 6th grade. When Fred and I were in Heritage Ensemble (AFT’s predecessor troupe) in the 1980’s, Fred imported Jeff to offer directorial advice. He joined AFT in 1991 and never left.

Jeff is complex. He looks like Adonis. He’s deeply into family. When excited, he’s like a kid at a birthday party. His acting chops are so advanced that, when we had a cold reading of our fall musical “Guys & Does” this week, his Talking Deer had people both laughing hysterically and deeply moved.

Jeff’s also really smart, summa cum laude from UW-Madison. He often sits quietly gathering opinions. But when he speaks, you don’t forget it. It’s like standing in front of a charisma beacon.

Jeff's advice to actors is simple, direct, and profound. "You need to tell the story---or else go home," he intoned to us recently. Encouraging our younger actors to annunciate, he said, "We don't know anything you are going to say. It's a mystery."

Priority for Process

Like all of us AFT old-timers, Jeff was profoundly influenced by our work with Second City founder Paul Sills. This led to Jeff's creation of "Bone Dance", our most popular story-theatre show ever. But Jeff also adopted Paul's theory of saying "yes" to what comes down the pike. AFT is about process, Jeff says. There's no resistance.

This includes dealing with the vicissitudes of weather in outdoor theatre. I recall the night we were hoping the rain would stop so we could do a show. Jeff's reaction? "God is saying, 'Don't do a show. I'd rather just look at a wet pine tree.'"

That's Jeff Herbst, whose quest for quality helped transform our theatre in the pines.

Incidentally, Creative Kids Day and AFT's "Northwoods Nightcap" are both Friday, July 17. Fun for all ages!

See you under the stars.

AFT performs at the Peninsula State Park Theatre Monday-Saturday through August 29. The world premiere ***Cheeseheads, the Musical*** plays Monday at 8 pm, Wednesday at 6 pm, Thursday at 8 pm and Saturday at 8:30pm. ***Sunsets & S'mores***, a centennial celebration of Peninsula State Park, plays 8 pm on Tuesday and 6 pm on Saturday. ***Muskie Love*** returns on Wednesday at 8:30pm and Friday at 8 pm. Advanced and reserved tickets are available at www.folkloretheatre.com, at 854-6117, at the AFT office in the Green Gables Shops in North Ephraim, or at the box office at the theatre one hour prior to performance. A park sticker is not required in the theatre lot for the show.

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