

The show must go on ... in a different way

By Rhonda Van Pelt

What's a theater company to do in this time of social distancing?

Well, instead of actors and audience crowding together in one place, one local troupe is taking its show on the road — make that the trail.

Theatre Across Borders is putting on a production called “Magic of the Marsh,” billed as an interactive theater hike, safe for the COVID-19 era. It will take place at Bear Creek and Fountain Creek nature centers on consecutive Saturdays in July.

The idea began to take shape in mid-May, while Theatre Across Borders' founder, Melissa Law-O'Rear and her husband, Stephen, were walking in Black Forest. After hearing that theater companies were cancelling their seasons because of the pandemic, they started brainstorming about how people could safely see live theater.

“An outdoor promenade-type of theater came to mind, where groups of 10 could travel together,” Law-O'Rear said.

They added the environmental theater concept, in which “the elements of the space influence and inspire the creation of the story and the actors' relationships with the space,” she said.

She then contacted Tierra and Nick Izzo, who recently produced a site-specific piece called “Night Terrors” at the Rosemount Museum in Pueblo. They jumped on board with the Theatre Across Borders plan.

Next: find the ideal spaces. Law-O'Rear contacted Nancy Bernard, supervisor at Fountain Creek Nature Center.

“She was very excited about the idea and before we knew it we were talking about details and scheduling show dates. Both Fountain Creek Nature Center and Bear Creek Nature Center have been wonderful to work with and we are already discussing future interactive nature hikes,” she said.

The creative team of Izzos and O'Rears spent hours exploring Fountain Creek trails, gathering information and inspiration for their production. Tierra Rizzo and the O'Rears wrote the script.

“The environment of Fountain Creek really shaped the story itself,” Law-O'Rear said.

They made some adjustments for Bear Creek's “more adventurous, but still kid-friendly” terrain.

Each timeslot will be limited to 10 audience members and everyone must wear masks. One member will be designated the “handler,” and will wear gloves and collect items along the trail to help that group save the marsh.

Audience members will have to stay at least 6 feet away from the actors or the character's magic will be tainted, Law-O'Rear warned.

“We found that the challenges that would normally limit live theater in the indoors actually gave life to new creative ways to tell a story,” she said.

“For example, the audience experiences a story



Courtesy image

Ryan Wilkes plays Beast of the Tall Grass and Richard Sebastian-Coleman plays Harnick the fiddler in “Magic of the Marsh.”

unfolding through space and time where the audience themselves is moving with the story. At each scene along the trail, they get to see a new scene and interact with new characters.”

Theatre Across Borders will stage sneak previews of the production at Hunter-Wolff Gallery, 2510 W. Colorado Ave.

Three characters will be on the sidewalk 5-8 p.m. Friday, July 3. One performer will be on hand noon-2 p.m. Saturday, July 4, during Adam Long's free drawing workshop at the gallery. Long uses elements of nature for his sculptures, so it seems like a good fit, Law-O'Rear explained.

“‘Magic of the Marsh’ has a great cast made up of puppeteers, large-creature performers, musicians and actors who have been seen in shows all over Colorado Springs and Denver,” she said.

They are: Ben Bodnar, Mitsy the Minstrel; Jim Hayes, Banelby the Bard; Barbara Summerville, Mallow the Witch of Growth; Cyndi Parr, puppeteer for Hogweed the Goblin; Sarah Atkinson, Princess Blush; Ryan Wilkes, Beast of the Tall Grasses; Richard Sebastian-Coleman, Harnick the fiddler; and Paige Reilly, Mire the Witch of Decay.

The costumes are a team effort between Tierra Izzo, Law-O'Rear and Lorien Lindstrom of Lady Lorien Designs.

“Lorien's creative approach on ‘Magic of the Marsh’ has been instrumental in bringing the themes of growth and decay in the play to life, as well as maintaining the integrity of the natural elements of both the Fountain Creek and Bear Creek nature centers,” Law-O'Rear said.

The Colorado Springs native is happy to be back in the area after living a total of 15 years in

Wisconsin, Chicago and New York City. After earning a graduate degree in educational theater at New York University, she taught drama in public schools there.

While in Chicago, Law-O'Rear collaborated on projects that incorporated site-specific, environmental and promenade theater, but this is her first interactive theater hike.

She's been back here for four years and teaches full-time in The Colorado Springs School's “thriving arts program.”

Law-O'Rear sees theater as essential during these challenging times. Theatre Across Borders is designed to collaborate with other organizations in new ways that include enhancing classroom curricula and assisting with conflict resolution.

“Live theater is special. It brings unity,” she said.

“Anything could be going on in the world, but in a moment of live theater, people are transported, experiencing and sharing a story as it unfolds.”

IF YOU GO

“Magic of the Marsh” will be performed July 11 and 25 at Fountain Creek Nature Center, 320 Pepper Grass Lane, Fountain; and July 18 at Bear Creek Nature Center, 245 Bear Creek Road. Timeslots start at 10 a.m. and run every 15 minutes; the hike should take about one hour. Only 360 tickets will be sold for the three performance days. They are \$15 per person, available at theatreacrossborders.com.