Empowering women one show at a time

Laurel's Venus Theatre announces 2017 season
Playwrights from as far away as Australia and Greece submit plays to Laurel’s Venus Theatre. Critics laud the theater’s edgy and provocative vision. Audience members drive in from other states.

“We’re not really a community theater,” founder Deborah Randall said. Yet seating at this acclaimed venue on C Street maxes out at 30. It has 15 seats on either side of the stage. From your seat, you can almost touch an actor. Randall’s not kidding when she calls it an “immersion” experience.

“There’s something beautiful and connected about such a tiny space,” she said. “In the audience, you’re breathing next to someone. A lot of them are looking for adventure.”

One Venus play featured someone cooking and the smell of fried onions permeated the theater. At the end of the show, the audience was invited to sit down and eat.

Now in its 17th year (11th at this location), Venus Theater has posted its 2017 schedule. As usual, there will be four plays that run 20 performances each. The four are culled from up to 200 submissions that Randall receives every year. She said she reads every one. Plays are automatically disqualified if they have more than seven actors.

Of plays received, “I can only produce 2 to 4 percent,” Randall said. “It’s an incredibly subjective process. The people I work with respect that that’s what I do.”

The founder, an actress and playwright herself, said the theater’s tiny size is the source of its staying power. “We’re in the black. We operate modestly. We survive a lot on family

Deborah Randall, of North Laurel, on the set of Venus Theatre on C St. in Laurel.
donations and foundation donations as well as ticket sales,” she said. “We fly under the radar. We may be small, but we are incredibly agile.”

Randall, who lives in North Laurel, likes to talk about “journeys” and her path to the Venus Theatre has certainly been one.

A Prince George’s County native and graduate of Friendly High School in Fort Washington, she moved to Laurel in 1986 at age 19. She attended the University of Maryland, Baltimore County and began a life of a peripatetic play producer, working on stages in five states. A frequent venue was the former Warehouse on Seventh Street in Washington.

The drama bug bit her at an early age. “The Greeks hit me pretty hard," Randall said. “I was completely enamored of Medea. Why was she so murderous?”

Her mentors and key collaborators along the way have included the late drama teacher Bud Stringer; UMBC drama department head Wendy Salkind; graphic designer Laura Schraven; and Amy Rhodes, co-founder of Zeke’s Coffee House in Baltimore.

She has written several plays herself, one of which has been published: “Molly Daughter," a drama set against the Molly Maguire coal miner uprising in 19th-century Pennsylvania.

She founded Venus Theatre (the name comes from an in-joke about “Venus envy”) so she could set down roots. She said she has come to love the community of Laurel.

Her operation currently has a staff of seven, who are paid a stipend. She can hardly count the number of playwrights she has worked with. Some of them have gotten their plays accepted after multiple revisions suggested by Randall.

One of the playwrights is Claudia Barnett, whose play, “Aglaonike’s Tiger,” will get its world premiere on the Venus stage this year.

Barnett, a New Yorker who is currently a professor at Middle Tennessee State University, said her history with Randall goes back 10 years. Two of her plays have been staged at Venus.

“She is about doing work that matters. She’s fearless,” Barnett said. “She’s all things. She needs to care about the bottom line, but she’s also the director, so she cares about the art.”

The playwright said she is drawn to the collaborative vision fostered by Randall.

“She can read something and know what I want and make it better,” she said. “Venus is doing plays that no one else is doing. I can’t imagine anyone else doing that. It is unique.”

She even appreciates the theater’s decidedly unglamorous curbside appearance.

“It’s kind of like Greenwich Village; I think it’s delightful,” Barnett said.

Although Venus bills itself as a women-empowering performance company, Randall said she considers herself a writer first and a feminist second. She’s interested foremost in plays that bring “an interesting dynamic” to her stage.

There’s a sad note to this year’s season, which is dedicated to Tricia McCauley, an actress and yoga instructor, was raped and murdered in Washington on Christmas Day last year.

There’s little question Randall will remain a fixture here. She likes to reminisce about her early years in Laurel working as a waitress and living on free pizza and cole slaw.

“I just love this town. I can’t explain it. I don’t miss the city at all,” she said.

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**2017 Season**

Plays scheduled for the 2017 season at Venus Theatre are as follows:

- Selections from the “Methuen Drama Book of Suffrage Plays,” March 16 to April 9. Eight short plays are Edwardian comedies created to entertain women who picketed and protested for the right to vote at the turn of the century. The plays are emblematic of “a period which witnessed enormous political and social change.”

- “Tunnel Vision” by Andrea Lepcio, May 11 to June 4. The construction of an art installation brings together two women who struggle to keep their composure as they come to realize they are “stuck” in this space. The play spotlights the “stigma that comes with not choosing the traditional path assigned our gender.”

- “Aglaonike’s Tiger” by Claudia Barnett, Sept. 7 to Oct. 1. Aglaonike, the first female astronomer, could predict lunar eclipses, but her science was suspect because she was a woman. She therefore bills herself as a sorceress in a play that draws on Greek traditions and uses puppets and masks.

- “The Ravens” by Alana Valentine, Nov. 2 to 26. A world stage premiere of a radio play that won a BBC International Radio Writing Award, “The Ravens” observes Kira, who is trying to exit the life of a sex worker in Sydney, Australia, when she wins a large victim’s compensation payout. The cash becomes more of a problem than a relief, but opens the possibility for her and a friend to transform themselves through art.

Tickets for performances are $40 and are available at the website venustheatre.org or by calling the theater at 202-236-4078.

—David Sturm