

If You Go

"Stop Kiss," a drama about an innocent kiss between two women that sets off a social firestorm, is playing Friday through Sept. 17 at the Langhorne Players at the Tyler State Park Mill in Northampton. Tickets: \$16 to \$18. Schedule and information: 215-860-0818.

COMMUNITY

Provocative in play

The Langhorne Players continue with out-of-the-ordinary projects.

By **MICHAEL ELKIN**
CORRESPONDENT

Are the Langhorne Players raiding Bonnie Raitt's songbook for inspiration?

Well, her "Let's Give Them Something to Talk About" seems to be the musical muse for the community theater, which has been quite literally the talk of the town over its 70-year stage span.

But just which town is that? Although named after the Bucks borough, the troupe has been a wandering ensemble for much of its history, giving credence to a paraphrase of Shakespeare's notion that all of Bucks County is a stage. After surviving flooded footlights and firestorms not by critics but by Mother Nature, the company has been headquartered at Spring Garden Mill in Tyler State Park, Northampton, since 1976.

Settling finally on a location, the company has made it a point never to settle artistically, says Rob Norman, who should know: He is about to celebrate his 25th anniversary with the all-volunteer players, filling multiple roles as actor, director, administrator and force of nature himself, all while

giving credit to two gentlemen, Rich Stockwell and Curt Herr, the "artistic backbone of the company for years, who brought energy and sophistication."

"They elevated the level of the Langhorne Players," said Norman with admiration.

And the current company — which is headed by JoAnne Pinto, president of the board of directors — wants to bring it higher and higher.

"We have developed and built on their ethos," said Norman. "And all on a modest budget of \$45,000 a year."

Frugal but not frightened off by large-scale challenges, with productions staged at the Tyler State Park mill in a special arrangement, the players have a long-playing history with the mill.

"We rent it at \$100 a year, but over the past 20 years we have spent \$300,000 on the 200-year-old mill," Norman said, refurbishing and refinishing.

One thing that doesn't need resurfacing or sanding is the edge the company brings to its offerings.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF DANTE MICHAEL

The Langhorne Players staged Harold Pinter's "Betrayal" in July, starring (from left) Frank Falisi, Brian Kelly and Sarah Stryker.



Starring in "Stop Kiss" are (from left) Ken Marbleston, Leann Newman, Carla Ezell, Vincent Pleggi and Kathryn Wylde.

Players

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"We want to bring thought-provoking theater to our audiences," said Norman, who claims that even the company's comedies are that, citing the iconoclastic playwright David Mamet's "November," an October surprise of a prescient presidential political play with a trace of Trump, staged in 2010 before the current real-life campaign started unfolding in Washington.

Over the years, there have been some disgruntled theatergoers — Mart Crowley's "The Boys in the Band," a landmark 1968 off-Broadway drama about gay life, opened to some discordant local responses when it debuted in 1975 — but "there never have been any protests," Norman said.

"We never want to offend, but rather provoke."

Precisely the reasoning behind the final two productions of the season: Diane Son's "Stop Kiss," which explores lesbian longing, beginning Friday; and Itmar Moses' "Bach at Leipzig," which goes back to the Enlightenment to dissect the darkest of human behavior, directed by Norman, Oct. 14 to 29. Both take place in the Betty Davis Memorial Theater, named after one of the company's late leading players on and off the stage.

And if none of the attractions curl the audience's toes, the snacks just may. Offered free along with soft drinks during intermission, cheese curls are reportedly the snack of choice for audiences, prompting at one point the sale of T-shirts that advocated, "Come for the Cheese Curls. Stay for the Show."

And they do stay, filling up the 73-seat house, taking part in the "talk back" dialogue between audience and actors, and also getting an eyeful of inspiration from the company's lobby art gallery.

The stage certainly has revolved and evolved since the Langhorne Men's Club first raised \$200 70 years ago to put the players up on their feet with wishes of "break a leg." And it certainly has come a long way since Edward and Katherine Macon opened their home to a loose-knit band of area actors to form the company a bit earlier that year.

But really, Norman reasons, nothing's really changed; the troupe, he avows, has always just wanted to give audiences something to talk about.

And about that ... Norman is not willing to give out comp tickets readily, since so many of the shows sell out. But he is eager to make one exception for someone who is always welcome for free.

Especially if she shows up with her guitar. And that one person? "Bonnie Raitt," he said with a chuckle, noting the company's unofficial musical muse.

Michael Elkin is an award-winning arts writer and playwright, and author of the novel, "1, 95."



COURTESY OF LANGHORNE PLAYERS

Starring in "Time Stands Still" this past spring: (from left) Laura Scott, Nigel Rogers, Sara Stepnowski and Tom Dinardo.