Bainbridge Islanders take their arts — and artists — seriously

by Wayne Johnson

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FINISLOW, Bainbridge Island — "One can start in the arts here when they're only 3 years old, and we have programs to keep them going in the arts for the rest of their lives."

Few arts organizations can say that about Bainbridge Island. Using funds from the Bainbridge Performing Arts (BPA), ran and does make it possible for some organizations, which has a success story about how community arts groups would evolve — and could — start from.

The multifaceted organizations on Bainbridge Island, located across Puget Sound from Seattle, have been in existence for over 30 years. BPA is one of the most aggregative and talented groups in the area. "I'm no critic, but when I go to their shows, the performers seem so talented that I wonder, 'Are they really just amateurs and our own island people?'

"Yes, they are. Mostly, BPA brings in artists from Seattle, but they're usually in their 30s and up, directing or teaching. For example, Chris Norby, a Seattle-based director, choreographer, performer, is the director of BPA's production of the George Sardi-

A sailing trip across Puget Sound, from Seattle to Bainbridge Island, is an adventure that offers a wide variety of activities. The island is surrounded by water, and the only way to reach it is by ferry or seaplane. The island is known for its scenic beauty, with rolling hills, picturesque waterways, and a variety of wildlife. The island is also home to a number of small communities, each with its own unique character.

Although separated in age by many decades, Jordan Fried- lied in various BPA training programs and productions about 30 years ago and has been a professional actor in a key role in the Seattle Children's Theatre's recent production of "Through Separate Doors."

Friedman recalls that his first BPA production he played in was a tale of a crocodile: "All I had to do was act a bear! There it was my first stage job, and I was never going to go back." Planning a sailing trip across Puget Sound, from Seattle to Bainbridge Island, is an adventure that offers a wide variety of activities. The island is surrounded by water, and the only way to reach it is by ferry or seaplane. The island is known for its scenic beauty, with rolling hills, picturesque waterways, and a variety of wildlife. The island is also home to a number of small communities, each with its own unique character.

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For folks on Bainbridge Island, all the world’s a stage

ACTORS

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"60 hours a week!" said Rice.

Between them, they handle the details for BPA’s six principal programs: the children’s theater (performances by kids for kids), the adult theater (two play productions a year), the musical production (one a year), the Greasewood Repertory Company (for high school students), the Second Stage (for experimental work and Theaterworks, among other activities), and the Young Artists’ Theater Workshops in the summer.

"The Greasewood Repertory Company is essentially a professional training program for young actors," said Glenn Burdick, who is known to Seattle theatergoers as a director and choreographer. "The kids have to audition to get into the company. They pay a small tuition fee. We rehearse at least twice a week, and each week we develop a new production. This year’s show was "Quick in Progress."

She explained that the Greasewood Repertory Company receives regular instruction from herself as well as theater professionals Seattle. The students also learn how to audition.

"As a result of all that," said Glenn Burdick, "they get cast in professional productions and in TV and radio commercials, and some have gone on to attend top actor training schools.

"Girl Crazy," this summer's musical production with a cast of 24, 10 boys and 14 girls, ran through June 30, with performances at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 6 p.m. Sunday. It will be housed in a former supermarket, a temporary home for BPA shows.

BPA knows a lot about temporary homes. Since it never has had its own theater, it uses the halls of public schools, community centers, churches and even a parking lot (where for two summers it erected a tent in its summer musicals).

"Audience members have been put into trying to find a permanent home for BPA," said Mayor Vernon "Vern" Storey. "There’s super enthusiasm for the group, but no home.

"We’re exploring building a theater in an area to a senior center, and we’re also looking into putting a theater into a new downtown parking facility.

BPA also serves as an umbrella organization for the Bainbridge Chorale and Orchestra, the annual Seattle Symphony family concert on the island, visits by members of the Oregon Shakespearean Festival, and various other touring and/or arts-related activities on the island.

"The community is becoming more and more aware that the arts need space," said Rice. "There’s an increasing recognition of the importance of our work, especially in the training we provide for children from a very early age. In these programs, the kids develop their self-confidence and the ability to project themselves. That’s bound to be helpful to them even if they never go on to a stage."

"There’s no organization on the island that involves as many people as we do," said Glenn Burdick. "Our aim has always been two-fold: to further the arts and to further the arts on Bainbridge Island and in Kitsap County."

BPA has a 12-member working board. "And boy, do they work!" said Rice, 50 members (who pay a membership fee of at least $10) and an annual budget of about $50,000.

"We’ve always been in the black, without any grants," said Rice. "But it’s not possible to think we’re living in a Pollyanna world where we’re going to continue operating without any deficit. We’re going to have to go to the community for financial help, BPA has been giving to the community; now it’s time for the community to give to BPA.

"To borrow a couple of song titles from "Girl Crazy," the Bainbridge Island community clearly regards BPA as "Embraceable You," but if BPA is to do more than "Bidin’ (My) Time" it needs additional financial support so it can collectively exult, "I Got Rhythm!"