

Local Theatre Group Celebrates Fortieth Anniversary

by Thomas Johnson

When Prince George's Summer Teen Theatre premieres Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, at the Bowie Center for the Performing Arts on July 27 it will mark a milestone. It will be the group's fortieth production since its inception in 1967.

Producers Marguerite Connolly and Rick Bergmann claim that PGSTT is the longest-running theatre program for teenagers and young adults in the country. Both are determined to make this year's production a testament to the longevity of the program.

"[In choosing Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*] we were searching for a show that we had not done in our previous 40 years," said Mr. Bergmann. "We were also looking for a show that would stretch us as a group, challenge us to be creative. We also wanted something that would bring in large audiences. We wanted something that said we had made it through 40 years and we wanted to celebrate. This was the show we thought could do this."

"We consider this anniversary as a special time in our program," Ms. Connolly said. "The board wanted to create a unique show that would be *big* and would allow us to showcase the great things our program can achieve."

PGSTT was established in 1967 with the assistance of the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission and the Beltsville Recreation Council. The program's first production was *Lil Abner*. The subsequent thirty-nine productions have included *South Pacific*, *Grease*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Oklahoma*, and many others.

While the current producers weren't involved at the start, they did draw some conclusions about the show's early years. "Some of the shows require large casts, so there must have been great interest in our program in order to put on the first few shows," said Ms. Connolly. "In the years I have been involved with this program I have found that the greatest majority of our audience is the family and friends of our cast members. But, some shows have a great appeal and will pull in audience members from the community as well. People who come to their first show with PGSTT are always pleasantly surprised by the quality of our productions."

Public recognition and response to the productions, says the producers, is something that has increased over the last several years. "Our typical shows until 2000, when we did *Hello Dolly*, attracted about 200 people per show," said Mr. Bergmann. "That we have steadily built an audience since then. Our audiences typically range between 300 and 400 now. Audiences numbers often depend on the show. If you have a show that is not as well known, such as *Working* [in 1991] or *On the Town* [in 2001] audiences are smaller, than something as well known such as *Grease* [in 2004] or *The Wizard of Oz* [1987 and 2002]."

PGSTT has always striven for excellence, but that there has been a gradual change in how the program operates as a group throughout the years, say the producers. Ms. Connolly said, "We have made small changes to the productions in the last couple of years with our silent auction, our larger size program, our emphasis on mentoring young people through our program, and our encouragement of alumni to give back to the program what they have learned. The involvement of [directors] Matt [Thorpe], Hark [Tagunicar], and [choreographer] Nicole [Hagey] is the result of this encouragement. We have also made an effort to include as many teens as possible into our cast,"

Mr. Bergmann said, "The biggest change I have seen in the group since I became involved has been the push to make the cast and crew more of a family, even after teenagers have grown up and gone on to other things, we still try to keep tabs on them. This has been a

challenge for us, because currently most of us only go back about 10 years. We are always looking for alumni to share their memories with us. The other big change I have seen is the board has more of a focus on nurturing talent, we would like the people who go through our program come back and help us as adults, either as board members, directors, producers etc...”

The family atmosphere of PGSTT is something that many involved highlight as something that makes the program unique, and some most memorable moments for the producers in the program relate to that sense of closeness. “During my first year with PGSTT, my first tech crew member was this child, Emily Reams, who came up to me and proceeded to tell me what I was doing wrong,” said Mr. Bergmann.

“I worked with her for a few more summers and during [*The Wizard of Oz*, in 2002], the producers came to me and asked me if I thought Emily would be a good stage manager. I told them yes, but they still weren’t sold and asked me if I would be assistant stage manager, just in case and I agreed. But, as I told the producers, Emily turned out to be a better stage manager than I could ever hope to be. At the end of closing nights, I was able to present her with flowers for all of her hard work. I was so proud that she had done such a good job. It is still one of the most memorable moments in my life.”

Ms. Connolly said, “I find all the opening nights to be absolutely thrilling. Being producers is a lot of work, but when the curtain opens and all those kids I have come to know so well, and enjoy working with, come out and give their best effort for the show I am so proud to have played a part in that show. As a mother I have a special place in my heart for the performances of my children.”

When the producers were asked to give their opinions on why PGSTT has lasted so long, Ms. Connolly pointed to the dedication of the cast and crew, as well as the energy of the directors. “I think that PGSTT’s commitment to including all teens, their emphasis on teaching the theatre arts, and the support they get from the families who are involved have been critical in the success of the program. We strive to keep our program energized by bringing in new directors every two years, by searching for new shows to do or bringing a new twist to an older show. The Board is always searching for new people who will continue to serve the teens who come through our program. There has to be something very special about our program that has drawn teens to come perform with us and has also gotten adults to work with the program to keep it going.”

“I think PGSTT has lasted for 40 years because it serves a need. People want to be creative and have a creative outlet and I think PGSTT allows them to do that. We live in a culture that often puts arts behind the ‘academic’ subjects such as science and math. We provide teens with a chance to really work as a team and create something magical every summer.”

For any Hyattsville resident interested in seeing this “magical” end result of months of rehearsal, Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast* will be performed on July 27 and 28 and August 4th and 5 at 8:00 pm, with matinees at August 5 at 2 pm and August 1 at 1 pm at the Bowie Center for the Performing Arts. Tickets will be available at the door.