

# Entertainment

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## Fourth Street Playhouse: New director stresses quality



Keith Hindmarsh is the new managing director of the Fourth Street Playhouse. Natasha is the resident cat.

By Cathie Breidenbach  
Special writer

**WE MAKE A POINT** of selecting plays that don't rely on splashy technical effects or elaborate sets," said Keith Hindmarsh, new managing director of the Fourth Street Playhouse in Royal Oak.

"We rely instead on good-quality scripts and some of the finest actors and directors in Michigan."

At the intimate Fourth Street Playhouse, half a block off Main Street in downtown Royal Oak, the farthest seat in the house is nine feet from the stage. With a total of 72 seats, the small professional theater capitalizes on the intimacy of live theater.

"It's not like being at the Fisher where a TV would be better to see the actors' expressions. At Fourth Street we use the intimacy of the playhouse to our advantage," Hindmarsh said.

"WE DO MORE plays than anybody," he said of Fourth Street, which changes plays every six or seven weeks with weekends off in between.

The playhouse has staged two world-premiere productions, most recently "White Tail" by Michigan playwright William Sonnegg, who was raised in Plymouth. "We want to produce plays that can touch people, that give people situations they can relate to."

Hindmarsh has chalked up an impressive 250 performances himself at the theater since he came to Fourth Street in the summer of 1981.

"I fell into acting," explained the lanky 26-year-old, who grew up in Livonia, graduated from Bentley High School and went on to Wayne State University as a pre-med student. "One day I was sitting in chemistry class, and I realized how much I hated chemistry. So I dropped all my classes except English and French. Then a guy came into my French class and invited us to do French theater."

Hindmarsh did French theater the rest of the year and switched to acting in English at the Studio Theatre, downtown at the Hilberry. "That was when I was taking my one and only acting class. Now I don't have time to take acting classes because I'm too busy acting," he said.

BESIDES ACTING and directing, Hindmarsh handles the financial affairs of the theater as its new managing director. He likes combining the business of theater with the business of acting.

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— Keith Hindmarsh

"On any given day in the USA there are 10,000 unemployed actors. Almost all actors need to have some other talent to offer a theater. Maybe they're good at lighting design or whipping up costumes. People who're qualified to do something else are what we look for," he said.

During his early days with Fourth Street, Hindmarsh managed the box office and served for a year as technical director.

Now he's in charge of the business side of the theater. Like many art endeavors in recent years, the Fourth Street Playhouse "has experienced some very tight moments, but we've always pulled through." Hindmarsh anticipates that the theater's recently acquired tax-exempt status as a non-profit corporation will open some financial doors. It can accept contributions from individuals and businesses.

Fourth Street offers a feature play four times each weekend (8:30 p.m. Fridays, 6 and 8 p.m. Saturdays and 7:30 p.m. Sundays). Ticket prices range from \$7-\$9, with half-off discounts to students with ID, senior citizens and unemployed people with MESC cards.

FOURTH STREET also has the best group rates in town, Hindmarsh said. Every Friday and Saturday night, its Midnight Studio produces short, often experimental plays, at the witching hour.

Most of Fourth Street's audiences come from the northern suburbs — Royal Oak, Southfield and Oak Park, with heavy support from Birmingham and the Bloomfields and some from Livonia. "Our usual playgoer is very literate, usually college-educated and somewhat affluent," he said.

"Waiting for the Parade," next feature play, opens Friday, Feb. 24, and runs through Saturday, April 7. It's a warm, gentle show about five women

in Alberta who are waiting for their men to come home from World War II. "What the Butler Saw," an outrageous British farce by Joe Orton, will follow "Parade" in April.

Back in 1980, a group of actors and directors formed the theater to guarantee they would have a place to perform. The nine-member board of directors, composed of theater people and members of the community, hires four permanent staff members: managing director, Keith Hindmarsh; artistic director, J. David Kelley Jr., who comes up with a season of plays; chief publicity director, Walter Hill, and marketing coordinator, Beth Temple.

And there's Natasha, the only other permanent personality at Fourth Street. She's the resident feline who gets paid in cat chow for her vivacious company.

FOURTH STREET is a professional company, which uses at least one Equity actor (member of the professional actors' union) and an Equity stage manager in each production. The cast receives minimal pay for its work.

The lineup of plays each season offers mellow and less well-known selections than the safe musicals and Broadway crowd-pleasers that are the favorites of amateur groups. As an "alternative" theater, it doesn't attract audiences by featuring big-name lead players, who come from out of town. Its draw week after week is consistent quality in acting and scripts.

"Well, it isn't Walt Disney," is a line that's become a running family joke in the Hindmarsh household. Some of the Fourth Street productions mince neither words nor situations and are definitely "not Walt Disney."

Hindmarsh now rents a flat in Detroit, but his mother and father, Lila and Andrew Hindmarsh, still live in Livonia and see almost everything Fourth Street puts on. "They've been very supportive of me," he said. "My mother's only request is that I warn her in advance about a show that might affect some of her rather Presbyterian views."

Hindmarsh has clearly cast his lot with theater. "The low income is heavily outweighed by how much I like what I'm doing. People here are not a bunch of strange actor-types with peculiar reputations — the kind you wouldn't want your son or daughter to go out with. They're regular people who are really into what they do."

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