

# Director gives behind-the-scene peek at community theater

Directing a play is a lot more work than acting in one and the process begins well in advance of nearly every other aspect of the production.



HOLLY G. HELLSTEN

Neil Simon's *Proposals*, at Village Players in Birmingham, is no exception. When the directorship was assigned to me almost a year ago, I began to read and re-read the script until I knew it thoroughly. The nine characters gradually became "friends" of mine, and it became important to me that the audience like them and care about what happens to them.

The pivotal character is the housekeeper of the Hines family, Clemmie Diggins, played by Frances Shipp-Smith of Detroit. She occasionally steps out of the action to speak directly to the

audience, providing background, insight, and many a wry remark about the various relationships that are the focus of the script.

The Hines family consists of ailing father Burt, his ex-wife Annie, and their daughter Josie (played by Bryan Conroy, Julie Tillotson, and Jules DeWard, all of Royal Oak). When Annie, Josie's fiancé (Eric Kent, Farmington Hills), her former boyfriend (Matt Rafferty, Royal Oak), a Miami hoodlum Josie danced with once (Tony Castellan, Royal Oak), a non-too-bright New York model accompanying the former boyfriend (Eva Evelyn, Macomb), and Clemmie's prodigal husband (Vern Headen, Detroit), all converge on the family cottage on a late summer day, opportunities abound for Mr. Simon's special blend of humor and tenderness.

In fact, *Proposals* seems to me to be a valentine from Neil Simon to the playwright. While his characters wrestle with their feelings,



the theme could be "love conquers all." A little forgiveness never hurts, either.

Online research provided additional background about the development of the original production, which had its first try-out in Phoenix. There Mr. Simon

cut it from three hours down to the standard two, then moved to Los Angeles for further polishing before heading to Broadway. I read online the Burt character is essentially a Simon self-portrait, so I picked up *Neil Simon Rewrites: A Memoir*.

Although I've never been a particular fan of Neil Simon comedies, the man I read about

in his autobiography intrigued me. He had a rocky childhood and lost his first, much beloved, wife to cancer, but his descriptions of even these difficulties are imbued with grace and gratitude for the good times.

Early in his career, Mr. Simon spent summers working at a resort in the Poconos, the relaxed atmosphere of which lends dramatic tension to the various relationship struggles in the play. He also transfers some of the experience of losing his first wife to his script, in the way Josie and Annie deal with the heart disease threatening Burt.

*Proposals* presented a casting challenge for us: There are two roles for African Americans and our current membership includes only one. In fact, we chose this play as part of our strategy to increase the diversity of our membership.

To prepare for auditions, I chose selections from the script that would give actors the best opportunity to "show their stuff," while allowing me to try various combinations of actors — hoping to find "chemistry" between them, in addition to talent.

Only one African American actor appeared for the auditions, a non-member. Fortunately, she was a good actress, and we cast her, but that still left the African American male role vacant.

Barbara Bloom, who will direct our next production, *Annie Get Your Gun*, had recently auditioned at another community theater and referred me to a gentleman she'd seen there. While we were setting up auditions, the female role became vacant again! The actress we'd cast had a schedule change and wouldn't be available, after all.

Everyone in the cast and crew began scrambling, calling other community theater groups and even trying to recruit friends who'd never been onstage before. It takes a special sort of lunacy to climb up on a stage for two hours, in front of a live audience, to speak someone else's words; recruiting new thespians wasn't exactly successful. After many phone calls, e-mails, and meetings, the man Barbara recommended (Vern Headen) and an acquaintance of his (Frances Shipp-Smith), both veterans of Detroit Repertory Theatre, successfully auditioned and completed our cast.

As the director, my biggest challenge has been to guide the actors toward the most natural characterizations possible. Instead of the larger-than-life kind of acting we tend to see in musical theater and broad comedy, *Proposals* requires actors who don't appear to be acting. It's important that they seem like real people, experiencing real life. It isn't easy, which makes the result especially gratifying, when it works.

The actress playing Josie, Jules DeWard, has been delightful to watch grow in this way. Jules has done a lot of larger-than-life roles, including the ingenue in a very silly Simon farce called *Pootie*, in which I directed her a few years ago. I've never seen her do this sort of work before and it's thrilling! In fact, the entire cast is wonderful, each of them striving to become the character envisioned. If the actors, the staff, and I do a good job, the audience will never know where my work ends and someone else's begins.

**Proposals:**  
Matt Rafferty (left), Jules DeWard and Tony Castellan rehearse a Neil Simon play opening Friday, March 15 at the Village Players theater in Birmingham.

## Village Players of Birmingham

What: Present Neil Simon's *Proposals*  
When: 8 p.m. Friday-Saturday, March 15-16, 22-23 and 29-30, and 2 p.m. Sunday, March 17 and 24  
Where: Village Players Playhouse, 34660 Woodward, Birmingham  
Tickets: \$14. Call (248) 644-2075

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