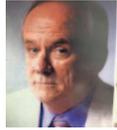


'Twelfth Night' understudy preps for the unexpected

Amanda Sieradzki

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Long-time actor Jim McMurtry hopes he won't have to take the stage at the Capital City Amphitheater when the Southern Shakespeare Company presents "Twelfth Night" May 6-9 at Capital City Amphitheater.



**Jim
McMurtry**

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"Some actors think of [the understudy] as a thankless job, but it is very necessary, especially in the times of COVID when you have to be ready for anything," says McMurtry. "It's a large line load, but at my age that's not easy. So, I took this as a challenge to learn all the lines without the benefit of the blocking or the interaction with other actors, and

to still be ready to step in if needed."

McMurtry, 71, enjoys tackling the mental and time-consuming puzzle of memorization, especially since retiring from his 30-year career as a letter carrier. This role will be his first chance to flirt with the possibility of being onstage since the pandemic shut down theaters across the world.

McMurtry received his jab of the COVID-19 vaccine a few weeks back and is ready to venture out of his quarantine routine. Pre-COVID, he could be found on the dance floor at The Moon surrounded by fellow adrenaline seekers or working with companies like Tallahassee's Irish Repertory Theater, for which he has served on the board.

"I love a crowd," says McMurtry. "I'm very much ready to get out and see people again."

McMurtry performed with the cast for Southern Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors" three years ago. While he enjoys the liveliness of large, outdoor works, he earned his acting chops primarily in intimate, small theater settings. He first

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Rehearsals for "Twelfth Night," Southern Shakespeare's sixth outdoor festival set for May 6-9. PROVIDED

If you go

What: Southern Shakespeare Company presents Twelfth Night

When: 6:30 p.m. May 6-9

Where: Capital City Amphitheater, 1001 Gadsden St.

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information, call 850-320-0882 or visit southernshakespearefestival.org

McMurtry

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caught the theater bug in high school and attended Perry Mansfield's theater camp in Colorado while studying with Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri.

When McMurtry arrived in Tallahassee, he joined the Etcetera Theater Company and was enthralled with the modern, adventurous plays and playwrights he got a chance to explore. When that group disbanded, he joined Off Street Theater and worked for a number of years with Theater Tallahassee.

With the guidance of mentors, Richard Fallon and Chuck Olsen, he was able to sink his teeth into memorable roles

like Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman," C.S. Lewis in "Shadowlands" and George in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

"I try as an artist to be a blank slate and put the character on," says McMurtry. "I always try to find something I can physicalize. In one of my earlier roles, I played a country fellow that made me think of a stubborn mule, so I started to think of the animal characteristics of a mule. One of the things I love about theater is being able to slip into another skin."

Embodying the physical attributes of a character is just one inroad for McMurtry when preparing for a role. He will spend hours analyzing the words a playwright chose to gain further insight into his characters. He notes that the vocabulary and sentence construction

will often reveal how to inflect or project a line in the script.

In McMurtry's interpretation of Malvolio, he sees the character as a supercilious narcissist and a social climber. Even throughout the trickery that makes "Twelfth Night" one of Shakespeare's memorable comedies, McMurtry sees the play as a satire that pokes fun at people like this character who act out of their own self-interests rather than the common good.

He has enjoyed watching the show come together behind the scenes while attending rehearsals. This will be Southern Shakespeare's sixth outdoor festival and is free to the public to attend.

In compliance with COVID-19 safety guidelines, attendees must reserve seating. A pre-recorded screening of

The Bardling's "ShakespeareTold V: Inspiring Social Change" will begin at 6:30 p.m. each night before the performance.

Regardless of whether or not McMurtry will view the show as an audience member or costumed from the wings, he is looking forward to the spontaneity and excitement that live theater like this large-scale festival offers.

"I realize we're a long way from getting this pandemic under control, but I'm enjoying the rehearsals," says McMurtry. "I am looking forward to being able to see it onstage with all the costumes and all the energy that outdoor theater brings."

Amanda Sieradzki is the writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).