

History gets 'Salty' at Monticello Opera House

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A Quincy native, Mike Herrin feels at home in Monticello, and finds joy in discovering the unique characteristics of the community. Stepping into the role of Executive Director of the Monticello Opera House this past year, he feels he's learned a lot about the town and its needs, especially during the curation of the upcoming performance season.

The Opera House's murder mystery show is one such unique offering on the bill. Weekends in May will feature "Murd-ARRR: Pirates of the Salty Dog," utilizing the venue's expansive dining room.

Audiences can pull up a chair at the Salty Dog tavern to be served by pirates, bear witness to pillaging, plundering, sword-fighting hijinks, and solve a whodunit over a three-course meal. Herrin, who took part as an actor in a previous murder mystery dinner theater, hopes for more fun evenings and invites attendees to dress the part.

"They just are a great let your hair down good time," says Herrin. "People just love the lightheartedness of the shows and being part of the action."

Herrin not only considers audience appeal when it comes to choosing shows, but also the social consciousness and inherent value to patrons. He wants to expand the possibilities for programming, and dream up ways to beautify the venue and make it even more historically accurate.

His appreciation for preserving the past comes from his previous title as Director of Facilities and Horticulture at Tallahassee's Goodwood Museum. While working at the museum, he began flexing his acting skills as a Historic Florida Tour Guide.

For annual ghost tours, Herrin often embodied vibrant political figure, Senator William C. Hodges, who was a former owner of the Goodwood estate. The position allowed him to combine his passions for historic preservation and storytelling, while also interacting with visitors.

"I found that it really widened my ho-



Opera House's murder mystery show in May will feature "Murd-ARRR: Pirates of the Salty Dog." DENISE TOSADO

If you go

What: Murd-ARRR: Pirates of the Salty Dog Murder Mystery Dinner Show

When: 7 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays, May 11-12, May 18-19, May 25-26

Where: Monticello Opera House, 185 West Washington Street, Monticello

Cost: \$35-45, reservations required

Contact: For more information, call 850-997-4242 or visit <http://www.monticellooperahouse.org/home>.

rizons and exposed me to new experiences and new ways of thinking," says Herrin. "It really changed my life and ultimately resulted in a change of career."

Herrin first dipped his toe into acting during the filming of "Recount" in Tallahassee in 2008. He was cast as an extra, and after thoroughly enjoying his time on set, auditioned to be in casts for the FSU film school where he took part in several movies.

However, it was at the Monticello

Opera House that Herrin first took to the stage, appearing in "Mouse Trap," "The Foreigner," and "The Music Man." In the latter show, he played Mayor George Shinn. Herrin notes that the research he dug into for the role turned up some stimulating facts that he used to portray the character.

"It was really interesting to study what life was like in the Midwest at that time and really imagining how this man came to be mayor from owning a pool hall," says Herrin. "I try and imagine the circumstances that the character is facing and connect them to my own experiences. It's also understanding the bigger picture of historical context and the physical surroundings that can be good motivating factors as well."

Herrin sees the larger picture with the Monticello Opera House as more than a theater venue. In addition to offering more classes, a documentary project funded by the Volunteer Florida's Rural Community Assets Fund is in the works. The endeavor will document graduates from the historic Howard Academy High School, which was the

first high school for African-American students in Jefferson County.

"It's an example of a way we can serve as a cultural facility and also document the history of the region while engaging students," explains Herrin, as high school students will head up the project, and learn to use the video and editing equipment while capturing stories of former Howard Academy students.

This open dialogue with the community has been a pillar of Herrin's time in theater. During a production of "A Raisin in the Sun," he recalls talkbacks with the audience that opened his eyes, not just as an actor, but also as a citizen, to a number of social injustices that continue to affect local communities.

"That's the wonder and the value of theater and the performing arts," says Herrin. "As an actor being involved in these plays you get exposed to a lot of issues. When you explore the themes of the play, they can be really educational."

The Opera House's combination of history, storytelling, and performing arts endears the venue to Herrin, standing as a cultural center in need of preservation. He asks how the organization can even better serve the Monticello community and beyond while facilitating more entertainment and education. Going forward, Herrin knows the Monticello Opera House's legacy is in safe hands thanks to the support from the staff, volunteers, actors, and educators that make it a success.

"Keeping this building open and functioning, bringing culture, education, and entertainment to Jefferson County and this region gives me a sense of purpose," says Herrin. "We have a lot of families and first timers and very talented people involved here at the Opera House. It's very democratic and a great way for people to enjoy the craft of acting and the fun of putting on a show but also gaining self-confidence and realizing their own power and voice."

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