

Limelight



Creative direction

Brian Davis, artistic director at Theatre Tallahassee, keeps it fun with summer farce

FROM THE COVER

Brian Davis stokes fun with farce

Amanda Sieradzki
Council on Culture & Arts

"Every place needs to be taken care of," said Brian Davis, artistic director of Theatre Tallahassee. "That's the thrill and reward of working in the nonprofit world. You are responsible for keeping an organization going."

Because the theater is now in its 70th season, Davis wonders what the original founders would think of how he has cared for it, as well as its trajectory and impact in the city. This season he directed "Leading Ladies," which opens June 6th and will run until June 23rd. While working on the comedy, Davis explains the delicate balance that must be struck when building a season.

"Every season we get in one or two shows that aren't the blockbuster hits, but will preserve the creativity of the theater," says Davis. "You have to have theater that challenges people."

Davis says theater fit his "goofy personality" while he was a student. He was involved with a local theater group as a creative consultant after college, but stepped away from the field for nearly 15 years. He returned to it after moving to Tallahassee.

Davis volunteered for the Tallahassee Museum's Halloween Howl as an actor and make-up artist. Each subsequent year, he built the haunted trail before serving as the Tallahassee Museum's membership manager. Davis' training in sound engineering and broadcast radio lent itself to running a soundboard for Theatre Tallahassee. The following season he directed "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown," and eventually he took on the role of artistic director.

"I got dragged back into theater," jokes Davis. "All my odd jobs fit together and made sense from that point on. I could be a manager, be creative and work in theater."

Davis acknowledges his indirect path to his current position — working for the IRS, answering calls as a 911 operator, stocking warehouse trucks, creating content for a booming Internet start-up. Each skill set brought him closer to a career in the arts, which ultimately aids in



Audrey (Robyn Smith Peters) isn't sure that Leo (Bob Myers) and Jack (Tom Sheehan) are really "Max" and "Steve." ABBY KINCH

running the theater.

As a director, he prefers taking on the smaller, less mainstream shows. Last year's "Constellations," was a unique challenge. The stripped down play doesn't use elaborate sets or props. Instead, it relies heavily upon the two actors that make up the entire cast.

"Every show is like a child," says Davis. "You're going to see how that kid grows up in the next six weeks, and every child turns out a little bit different. I enjoy any show where I get the chance to go a little outside of the boundaries of a normal production."

This season's "Leading Ladies" presented an opportunity for Davis to direct his favorite genre: farce. The show follows a case of mistaken identities as two soon-to-be unemployed Shakespearean actors attempt to pull off a major scam.

Set in the 1950s, the actors read a want ad written by an older woman looking to give her long-lost cousins their inheritance. It isn't until they ar-

rive at her home that they realize they need to be two women, not men.

"I've directed one other Ken Ludwig show called 'A Fox on the Fairway,' says Davis. "I call it 'Three's Company' on-stage. It's missed entrances, misunderstood personalities, wrong people, wrong places, wrong times."

Auditioning actors for these kinds of shows present their own set of challenges. Davis says that for this show, a note in the script from the director says that while the two leading men certainly take up the spotlight, the show really hinges on the actress that plays Meg, a naive country girl who wants to see the world.

In the rehearsal process, Davis enjoys when everyone is off script and knows the show by heart. It's at that point that he can step back and shape small details such as the number of steps taken to a certain spot, or the timing and delivery of lines. In other Ken Ludwig shows he also looks forward to the unique curtain call that drums up

If you go

What: "Leading Ladies"

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 2 p.m. Sunday; June 6-23

Where: Theatre Tallahassee, 1861 Thomasville Road

Cost: \$22 Adults, \$17 Seniors and Military, \$12 Students

Contact: For more information, call 850-224-8474 or visit theatretallahassee.org

the most excitement and laughs from the audience.

"For curtain call, Ken Ludwig recreates the entire show in 90 seconds," says Davis. "Every actor has to retrace all their blocking, steps, costume changes, entrances and exits. It's hysterical. The audience is always floored that we can pull it off, the actors are always amazed that they can do it, and I hold my breath every single night."

Opening night brings about a major exhalation and "goosebump moments." Davis says it's the first time since the table reading that he and the actors really enjoy the humor and nuances of the script. Hearing the first audience reactions solidifies why they work so hard for many weeks.

Davis feels lucky to be the caretaker for the Theatre Tallahassee legacy, and is looking forward to bringing the community a show that gives the audience an escape, and the talented people he loves working with a safe place to make art.

"The strongest communities I've seen and been a part of in my life have a thriving arts community," says Davis. "To lose that would be tragic. Sometimes it is frustrating, but then you see that one person whose life you helped or changed or redirected and it makes it worth it. Theater changes lives."

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).