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Wednesday, March 3, 2010

Programmed to please

Montgomery College offers diverse entertainment in its Rockville and silver spring performing arts centers

story by Karen Schafer Staff Writer |



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Whether students are performing in their pajamas, local urban dancers are "popping" or a Ukrainian philharmonic orchestra is stopping by on its world tour, Montgomery College is all about Entertainment 101.

This week the razzmatazz begins with MC's performing arts students presenting the romantic musical comedy "She Loves Me" at the Robert E. Parilla Performing Arts Center in Rockville today through Sunday. Just three days later, Parilla takes an international turn, with the 78-piece Ukrainian-based Odessa Philharmonic Orchestra performing Franz Schubert's Suite of Waltzes and Symphony No. 8 in B minor and selected waltzes, marches and polkas from Johann Strauss.

Meanwhile some 15 miles away, the dance company Urban Artistry will host a tutorial and performance at MC's Takoma Park/Silver Spring Performing Arts Center on Saturday.

While communing with the community, along with making moolah by renting out space may be on the school's agenda, "educating Montgomery College students comes first," explains Dr. Brad Stewart, Vice President & Provost Montgomery College - Takoma Park/Silver Spring.

And to that end, Karin Abromaitis has been hired to direct students in "She Loves Me." She calls the play a "breath of fresh air" completing a "blood and guts production" as an adjunct professor at George Washington University.

After working on four productions at MC, she has "watched as the students discover and connect with the script, a light bulb goes off, and it's fun. Anyone worried this is just a school show will be astonished."



R. Scott Hengen Store patron (Natalie Peigari) and clerk Amalia (Sarah Lasko) may see eye to eye, but the clerk's colleague Georg (David Weiner) is not impressed.



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For most folks, "She Loves Me," is best known for its contemporary movie adaptation, "She's Got Mail," starring Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks. Meg and Tom may have been "aw shucks" adorable, but MC is sticking to the original 1930s script, written by a Hungarian playwright Miklos Laszlo. Set in a European perfumery, two feuding clerks secretly find comfort in their anonymous romantic pen pals. Of course, they don't

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realize that they are each other's correspondents. With a 12-piece orchestra, Abromaitis categorizes the two-act play as "old school" with plenty of physical comedy.

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The fast-paced romantic comedy was a staple in the 1930s, but Abromaitis has learned that today's audiences "can be fickle, looking for mindless entertainment, but also seeking out what is the meaning of life."

Regardless of whether MC is promoting something serious or a lighthearted screwball production, its live theater "offers a sense of the community," Abromaitis observes.

Figuring out how to manage the Parilla Performing Arts Center, built in 1984, along with the recently opened Takoma Park/Silver Spring Performing Arts Center is being debated by a steering committee led by Deborah Preston, the instructional and college dean of the fine performing and visual arts. After the Takoma Park/Silver Spring Center with 500 seats and educational classrooms was completed, it became important to determine how to enhance each center's uniqueness but also unify the two campuses through its performing arts centers.

While the college grapples with making connections, Odessa's Maestro Hobart Earle wants to introduce another important connection to his audience. He hopes to show how "Strauss' polka is similar to jazz with its rhythmic freedom."

Speaking from his home in Odessa, the American "ex-pat" also is excited to show how the "waltz, if played properly, is completely unique."

Earle has learned that overworked European and American audiences appreciate hearing a lot of "short numbers;" thus, the concert's second half will be fast paced.

The maestro came to the Ukraine in a roundabout way. Raised in Venezuela by American parents, he spent his childhood at a London boarding, spent four years at Princeton University — his only time in the U.S. — and many more years honing his craft in Vienna, Austria. Some 18 years ago, Earle was asked to guest conduct the Odessa Philharmonic Orchestra.

"I spoke no Russian, but fortunately the orchestra had a Cuban violist and he translated Spanish to Russian," he recalls. A real connection evolved and he became the orchestra's permanent conductor.

In these years, Earle has seen vast changes in what he describes as an "international city." His musicians knowledge of other musical forms was once limited. Now they "have traveled the world and are familiar with many music styles."

Pop culture has taken a bite out of classical music, especially in the U.S.

"People have so many more entertainment options and less time," Earle observes.

Bringing the Odessa Philharmonic Orchestra to MC was important, insists Debra Fyodorov Rockville campus programmer. "With 78 members, it is a huge orchestra and was first sponsored by Georgetown University a decade ago."

Earle may be working his hardest to keep classical music in the forefront, but for the moment, urban dance is winning out. Even so, Urban Artistry artistic director Junious "House" Brickhouse is all about the correct dance definitions. Tired of people using the term "hip-hop" when referring to any and all urban dance styles, he seeks to clarify the differences between popping, locking, lacking, hip-hop and free style. While audience members will be entertained by his 12-member troupe, they also will learn about the history of urban dance.

The 1960s was a pivotal decade for urban dance, explains Brickhouse, 38, a logistical manager by day.

"James Brown and Aretha Franklin were speaking about issues and soon the community was interpreting these issues in dance," he says.

Influences can be traced first to Africa and then slavery, and Brickhouse also credits mime Marcel Marceau and even the robot on the television show "Lost in Space." Ultimately, the 1970s funk and disco explosion kick-started the urban dance movement.

While the steering committee ponders the future, Montgomery College's performing arts centers are hopping — literally.

Urban Artistry will host a tutorial and performance at 11 a.m. Saturday at the Takoma Park/Silver Spring Performing Art Center, Montgomery College, 7995 Georgia Ave., Silver Spring. Tickets are \$7; \$6 for students and seniors. Call 240-567-5775.

The musical comedy "She Loves Me" by Miklos Laszlo will be performed at 8 p.m. today through Saturday and at 2 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$10, \$8 for seniors and students. Odessa Philharmonic Orchestra will perform at 8 p.m. Wednesday, March 10. Tickets are \$30, \$28 for seniors and students. Both events take place at the Robert E. Parilla Performing arts Center, Montgomery College, 51 Mannakee St., Rockville. Call 240-567-5301. www.montgomerycollege.edu/PAC



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