



THE ANCHORAGE PRESS: ANCHORAGE'S MOST WIDELY READ WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

Dramatic Reunion

School friends form the core of summer stock effort

by T. Massari McPherson

June 19 - 25, 1997 / Vol. 6, Ed. 24

Cyrano's Off Center Playhouse is offering three comedies during its summer stock season this year. Three love stories with three very different sets of characters, the plays offer those of us not hiking, camping or fishing a perfect opportunity to relax and watch some of the city's most skilled actors performing very funny scripts.

However, it is the on-going summer drama at Cyrano's which may, in the end, prove the most interesting. In it, three old college friends, part of a group of tremendously talented theater students, meet nearly a decade after graduation. Their lives since college have been quite different.

The first man, after getting an advanced degree in theater, moved to New York City to try his hand at professional acting. A few parts and a lot of auditions later, he's back in his hometown, building income and skills before his next attempt to break into professional acting.

The woman in the trio never left home, staying close to the security of her family and building her career as a marketing executive. Still, she has done outstanding work in numerous local productions, kept honing her craft and now wonders whether she should take a chance at professional acting before she gets any older.

The second man turned his back on acting completely, tried and quit law school, taught English to Koreans for a year and now is looking for a way to return to his first passion - the theater.

Three different characters on three different paths, all are looking for a way to live the same goal - making a good living as working professional actors. They agree to work together to stage a summer stock season of three hilarious comedies. At a place called Cyrano's Off-Center Theater.

This real-life drama, unfolding this summer, is helping to generate the energy for this ambitious season schedule. Bostin Christopher, Shanwne Albright and Peter Ruocco, together for the first time since leaving the University of Alaska Anchorage, are all working full-time, as well as working in every show. "I must be crazy," said Christopher, who directs all three productions. "It started because I wanted to direct 'Sylvia' next season. But A.R. Gurney (the playwright) is going to be at the Valdez Theatre Festival so Sandy and Jerry Harper (owners of Cyrano's) suggested I do it as a summer stock piece and take it to Valdez."

"Sylvia" is the story of a couple's mid-life crisis and their talking dog's contribution to saving their marriage. Christopher selected two other plays to complement it. In the first production of the season, "The Nerd," a bumbling oaf with no social sense, little intelligence and less tact comes to dinner and then won't leave. "Social Security," the final play of the season, shows you're never too old to fall in love. The deal for the three plays was struck in the late winter, about the time Christopher was finishing his amazing one-man production at Cyrano's, "Pounding Nails in the Floor With My Forehead." He cast Peter, Shanwne and a couple other UAA alumni pals. Now he's laughingly wondering at his foolhardiness to tackle the back-to-

back challenge of the season.

"My area of expertise is acting," he said. "That is the most important part of the show to me and that is where I'm going to focus as the director. The sets will be minimalist. *Cyrano's* offers actors such an intimate, up-close contact with the audience, they can really see if someone is acting false."

"So much of what makes your acting on any given night is the energy that you get from the audience," added Shanwne. "*Cyrano's* is a great space for receiving that energy because you have them right there."

Shanwne, who appeared most recently in "*Metamorphosis*" and "*Seascape*," is looking forward to the challenge of the summer schedule with a disbelieving wonder similar to Christopher's.

"All these shows are on such a tight turnaround," she explained. "It is going to be a real challenge to completely develop the characters, explore their personalities and make them come into their own with the schedule we're on. They are very different." Rehearsal on the next production begins while the prior one is still being staged. Shanwne plays Tansy the weather girl in "*The Nerd*," Sylvia the dog in "*Sylvia*" and a rigid uppercrust gallery dealer in "*Social Security*."

"I'm most looking forward to playing Sylvia," she said. "We all apply human characteristics to our pets. Getting a human existence to this dog will be interesting. She is such a dog of the streets with a lot of rough edges." Shanwne jokes about gaining fame for playing animals.

"Playing a lizard (from *Seascape*) in front of Edward Albee was one of the most exciting and scary things I've ever done as an actress," she said. "Now, I have a chance to do that again for Gurney. I'm already nervous."

She's also looking forward to working with Christopher, Ruocco and other former UAA theater colleagues. "Bostin is such an incredible talent and a real good friend. Peter is a real strong actor and someone I am real fond of," she said. "I wouldn't give up this opportunity for anything."

"Bostin is definitely an influence I want to be around," agreed Ruocco. "His passion for the craft and the work, his honesty, are always admirable." Both men worked in UAA's award-winning production of "*Tracers*" and in "*True West*." Discussing his departure from acting since 1990, Ruocco said he has never, in all those years, been able to shake the need to be an actor, to tell stories. Since January, when he completed his year in Korea, he has been looking for ways to get back into the theater, checking out graduate programs and working on monologues. Christopher's suggestion that he come up for summer stock was the chance he needed to test his acting skills in front of an audience.

"Each play is working on a certain aspect of the craft," he said. "I haven't done a lot of comedy before. I'm learning that comedy has its own set of challenges and wonder about the dynamics of coming across as funny. "In '*Nerd*,' I am Axel, who is slightly self-destructive, slightly critical, slightly selfish, but is a layered character, which is what is challenging and interesting about this role. David (his character in "*Social Security*") has a similar sense of humor as Axel. That story is just so funny." Ruocco is especially looking forward to his three roles as a man, a woman and a unisex character, in "*Sylvia*."

"The three are instrumental in propelling the action of the play," he explained. "It will take some extreme character work making three characters that are that different."

After the summer season, none of the three is absolutely certain what comes next. All are open to opportunities to pursue their craft. Christopher thinks he will stay around through another winter and then maybe check out the L.A. scene. Fellow UAA classmate Todd Beadle has just moved to that city. Shanwne wants a solid opportunity and is, at present, uninterested in leaving the state to wait tables and audition for parts Outside. Ruocco too is cautiously open to possibilities.

"I'm not sure of what my commitment to Alaska is," he said. "I left for a long time. But I realize that

Alaska is a source of energy for me, a place of calm, a place of rejuvenation. I realize Alaska is the place where I know more people, have the strongest connections and a community of which I am a part."

Season Overview

Cyrano's Off Center Playhouse's summer stock of three comedies includes:

- "The Nerd" by Larry Shue plays June 26 to July 12.
- "Sylvia" by A.R. Gurney plays July 24 to Aug. 9.
- "Social Security" by Andrew Berman plays Aug. 28 to Sept. 14.

The productions play at 7 p.m., Thursday through Sunday. Tickets are \$12.50 for adults, \$10 for students and seniors. Purchase a season ticket for all three shows before June 26 for only \$25.

Off Center also hosts "Taxi Tales" with Brian Hutton Mondays and Tuesdays, and "A Little Off the Top Comedy Improv" hosted by Donna Kinnie on Wednesdays at 7 p.m. during the summer.

[HOME PAGE](#) [ADVERTISING](#) [PRESS FACTS](#) [SUBSCRIBE](#) [BACK ISSUES](#)

COPYRIGHT 1996 ANCHORAGE PRESS AND IMPACT WEB DESIGN