

All in: ArtStream's Inclusive Theatre Company debuts two plays

BY TOPHER FORHECZ, STAFF WRITER
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Everyone deserves a moment in the spotlight. For the members of ArtStream's Inclusive Theatre Companies, the opportunity to shine arises at least once a year.

Started by five local thespians in 2006, ArtStream combines actors with special needs and volunteers who create an annual show from the ground up.

Co-founder Nicolette Stearns says both actors and volunteers must abide by one rule.

"Everybody's got lines, everybody's got dance steps and everybody sings," she says.

ArtStream's two Gaithersburg-based companies will premiere "That 60's Play" and "The Good, the Bad, and the Money" on Friday at The Rosborough Cultural Arts and Wellness Center on the Asbury Methodist Village Campus in Gaithersburg.

When Stearns, director of "That 60's Play," and four other artists originally began ArtStream, their goal was to bring theater to underserved communities such as hospitals.

"You see these kids and they're bald, holding the IV, but they're so happy because they stand up and they get to be a princess and sing with us," Stearns says. "We would all leave there just sort of looking at each other, and you go, 'OK, put the whole world in perspective.'"

A year later, having seen the effects of their presentations on the audiences, ArtStream started the Inclusive Theatre Company. Now with five companies and a hospital and hospice program, Stearns says the niche ArtStream has carved out is in such high demand that it's hard to keep up.

Through ArtStream's private lessons, Stearns also regularly works on social skills with adults with disabilities.

"I don't do it as a therapist," she says. "I do it in a less threatening way or a fun way, so we role play how to take the bus or how to make change at Barnes & Noble or what in the world do you do at a party."

For the two Gaithersburg companies, each play starts with the actors sitting in a circle and brainstorming themes. Past ones have included a 1950s diner and a circus, but this year, it is the 1960s.

Set right before Woodstock, "That 60's Play" is a comedy with several musical acts.

"I wonder if it's not some sort of a metaphor for our actors because the hippies for them represent passion, acceptance and pushing the envelope, speaking out, camaraderie some of the values that are for our actors really important," Stearns says.

Such values explain why Ben Collins enjoys performing with the company. An employee with the communications department of the Special Olympics for 19 years and a participating athlete for 31, Collins works ArtStream into his schedule because of his passion for acting.

"It's a lot of fun, enjoyment," Collins says. "A lot of the camaraderie, applause when we do the shows. People are very happy because we put on a great show every year for the general public."

In "That 60's Play," Collins plays Happy Tappy, a tap dancing clown. Although legally blind, Collins learned how to tap dance with the help of a volunteer.

"As long as Ben wants to tap, we always find a way to make it work into the story," Stearns says.

Jennie Lutz, director of "The Good, The Bad, and the Money," says she also writes her shows to highlight her actors' strengths. With the circus show last year, for example, she included a particular role for one her less vocal actors.

"I had a role for clowns that would pantomime the whole show," Lutz says. "He might have a hard time learning lines or projecting his voice, but that was not a prerequisite for him [in this role]."



Tess Colwell/The Gazette ArtStream actors Lindsay Howard, Anne Bates and Garrie Barnes rehearse for "That 60's Play." ArtStream, an organization that offers artistic opportunities for special needs adults, will present two plays "The Good, the Bad, and the Money" and "That 60's Play" at the Asbury Methodist's Rosborough Theatre this Friday through June 26.

Lutz has been with company for five years and directing shows for the last two. Her show, "The Good, The Bad, and The Money" spoofs the typical spaghetti western with the tale of an absent minded sheriff who loses a high-stakes game of cards to some outlaws and doesn't have the money to pay them. The outlaws take a saloon girl hostage and it is up to Deputy Jethro to save the day.

"The Good, The Bad, and The Money" is also a comedy piece, which is fine with Conor O'Shaughnessy, who plays Jethro.

"What I like about acting is that I get to entertain people," he says. "I like to make them laugh."

This is O'Shaughnessy's second year with ArtStream, and he has become accustomed to the rehearsals.

"Some of the choreography can be a little challenging," he says. "But that depends on the steps I'm doing, and I'm very good at memorizing my lines. I don't get them down right away, but I pick them up."

The music for the shows was created by Daniel Villar, who is part of the writing process from the beginning.

"I think Daniel has really out done himself. We've kind of challenged the actors this year more so than what we've done in the past. We've given them a range of songs rather than just traditional musical theater," Lutz says. "And one of them is an overlapping round where three different groups sing verses at the same time. And they're really taking ownership of the songs."

The costumes and sets are also specifically crafted for the shows. For Lutz, being able to create whole shows with ArtStream has been her favorite achievement in the arts.

"Whether it be working with children, with adults or on stage because I'm a performer as well I've never been more proud," she says. "When I tell people about the work that we do, they say, 'Oh that sounds cool.' But when they come see it, they are blown away by the talent and the scale of the production we do."

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ArtStream's "That 60's Play" and "The Good, The Bad, and The Money" run Friday through June 26 at The Rosborough Cultural Arts and Wellness Center on the Asbury Methodist Village Campus, 409 Russell Ave., Gaithersburg. Performances start at 7:30 p.m. Fridays, 2:30 p.m. Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. on Sunday, June 26. Tickets are \$10. For information call 301-942-9595 or visit www.art-stream.org.



Tess Colwell/The Gazette Nicolette Stearns, director of "That 60's Play" leads actors in rehearsal before their Friday debut at the Asbury Methodist Village's Rosborough Theatre. The play "The Good, The Bad, and the Money" will also premiere on Friday evening at the theatre. Stearns is co-founder of Art-Stream, an organization that offers artistic opportunities for special needs adults.



Tess Colwell/The Gazette Jennie Lutz (right), director of the play "The Good, the Bad, and the Money" and Sydney Wolstein, a mentor for the Inclusive Theatre Company, rehearse for the show's debut Friday at the Asbury Methodist's Rosborough Theatre. The show will premiere with "That 60's Play."