

NIGHTLIFE



Silver Spring Stage enters 40th season

by Mark C. Robinson
Special to the Sentinel

SILVER SPRING - Tucked away in the lower levels next to a CVS Pharmacy at the Woodmoor Shopping Center, one of the preeminent community theaters in the D.C.-Maryland area celebrates its 40th season. Eschewing the bright lights or other fanfare, its name is artfully displayed on a sidewalk sign by a non-descript entrance: "Silver Spring Stage."

Though the sign lacks the glitz and glamour of a Broadway marquee, the Stage makes up for it with dedication to the craft of live theater. Every year a committee is formed from Stage board members and non-members alike to compile a diverse slate of plays to consider for the upcoming season. From that list comes seven full stage productions a year, a holiday show and an annual one-act summer festival that showcases mostly unpublished work from local playwrights. The plays range from intense dramas like "Agnes of God" to comic thrillers like the upcoming "Communicating Doors," for which the Stage has begun holding auditions.

The Stage has won many awards and nominations from various local organizations such as the Ruby Griffith Awards, and the Maryland Community Theatre Festival Awards. The Washington Area Theatre Community Honors (WATCH), an organization that recognizes artistic and technical excellence in community theatre throughout the D.C. area, announced their nominations on Jan. 20. Silver Spring Stage received 13 nominations, including



PHOTO BY BILL WYCKOFF

The Silver Spring Stage production of Seascape

three out of the six nominations for best play: "Agnes of God," "The Drawer Boy" and "Never the Sinner."

Michael Kharfen, one of the Stage's board members, was ready on a dreary Saturday afternoon to provide a spirited tour chockfull of trivia. Walking downstairs from its sidewalk entrance, posters of the season's productions such as "Broadway Bound" and "Deathtrap" line the walls.

Kharfen admits that it can be a challenge for Silver Spring Stage to draw in theatergoers. "You know, community theaters often can't be on the main streets," he said, "because we can't afford to be there, so we're a little bit off the beaten track."

"So it may take more of the intrepid theatergoer to find us here in the basement of the Woodmoor Shopping Center," Kharfen continued with a laugh. "But you know, you'll get a great return by making that little extra effort."

Those who make that effort include over 120 subscribers, who received discounts and preferred seating for their investment. "That's not a single person," Kharfen noted. "That can be multiple people ... we're very grateful for their support." These subscribers also provide valued feedback regarding the season's productions.

Silver Spring Stage responds in kind, using the framework of community theater to provide a valuable learning experience for the area. "We're non-profit," Kharfen said with pride. "We're here for the purpose of doing quality theater at an affordable price."

Founded in 1968, Silver Spring Stage initially used barn space from a church before moving to Woodmoor Shopping Center in 1970. Their new space previously housed a bowling alley, slot car racetrack and even a karate studio. The Stage recycled as many materials that its former inhabitants had to offer, even making use of the bowling lanes to build the actual stage as well as the countertop in the concession area.

Necessity being the mother of invention, the Stage finds various ways to accomplish various tasks, from set design to production to even the simplest tasks. "You have to be ... an intrepid explorer in order to find the objects that you need, and invent things as you go along," Kharfen said. In the course of one renovation, there was an area needed repainting. "We had a Boy Scout Troop that came in, and they painted for their merit badges. They painted the floors, and the walls ... so they did a great job, helping us clean up."

"Four years ago, we got a grant

from Montgomery County ... to make the Stage handicap-accessible," Kharfen said, while pointing out the elevator, refurbished lobby and restrooms. "So that made us eligible also for other grants," citing continued patronage from the county, as well as the Maryland State Arts Council. "We're very appreciative of that support."

The Stage is an all-volunteer theater, from the ushers and the actors to set designers and builders to the producers and the administrators. "Nobody gets paid," Kharfen said. Still, despite the Stage's amateur status, he added, "We consider ourselves quite professional in the way that we do our work."

Kharfen himself initially came to Silver Spring Stage in 1995 to audition for a part. It was his first major theater experience. Though Kharfen works for the D.C. Department of Health's HIV/AIDS Administration during the day, he also now wears many hats in his volunteer work with the community theater, becoming a Stage board member in 2000. "I've worked in the booth. I've produced plays, directed them, acted in them, built sets, painted sets, done props ... I can't sew, so forget that," he added wryly.

Kharfen is quick to point out that it is not his intention to disparage professional theater in any way, as many people in community theater will move on to work professionally on stage. "Community theaters and professional theaters often can be supportive of each other," Kharfen said, revealing that when Studio Theatre was going through a renovation, the Stage was able to make use of Studio Theatre seats no longer in use for their performance area. The Stage, in turn, offered their old seats to Laurel Mill Playhouse.

"I enjoy going to professional theater," he said, "but to me, when you go to see a community theater production, you see there are people that are up there, that are doing it purely for the love of the theater."

Observing the main stage set, which was constructed with canvas, padding and wood, along with a couple hundred pounds of sand to complete the effect, Kharfen said, "You can see here we had to invent a beach." This ersatz seashore awaits another performance of the current production of Edward Albee's Pulitzer Prize-winning play "Seascape" (reviewed two weeks ago by Sentinel Arts Critic David Cannon). The performance space has an eerie sense of quiet, highlighting



PHOTO BY BILL WYCKOFF

Mike Kharfan of the Silver Spring Stage

the unique and intimate setting for its various productions.

Moving on to another area of the Stage, Michael Kharfen is careful to avoid disrupting a scheduled rehearsal of the next production, Martin McDonagh's "The Cripple of Inishmaan," which hits the main stage on Feb. 22. Fortunately, the rehearsal is ending, leaving him free to continue the tour. "So this is where we store all of our furniture and set pieces," he said, pointing out that every set is built from scratch. The area also serves as a built-in rehearsal space as it has the same dimensions as the stage.

Having the space to store a variety of set pieces, the Stage is able to provide a needed service to other community theaters in the area. "We're often the theater that everybody borrows from," Kharfen said, "so everyone in Montgomery County who does community theater, and even some in P.G. County come to us to borrow furniture, because a lot of people don't have that kind of space."

Maneuvering through a dark corridor, the costume area is next; the room is divided between appropriate garb for women, and clothing for men. It's rare that productions call for costumes to be made from scratch. "More often, it is borrowing costume pieces," Kharfen said, "either from our costume shop, or from others." However, there are exceptions. The lizard outfits that are featured in "Seascape" were

designed by Eric Scerbo, and hang on a nearby rack.

"So this is where we have assorted tchotchkes," the Stage board member remarked on the props area. A plethora of objects filled countless wire shelves organized by categories. "Everything from lawn mower equipment, and sleds, and bottles ... and ancient typewriters," Kharfen said, picking out those very objects. The scene brought to mind an observation once made by a drama professor that a good theater will have a prop room that looks like a flea market. "And that's what this is," agreed Kharfen with a laugh.

When asked about the value of community theater, Kharfen answered, "It's an educational experience for those who participate in it. In many ways, you're involved in lots of different aspects of theater that, as a professional, you wouldn't. In professional theater, you're more or less sort of assigned to your specific task and role in it. But in community theater, you get to work backstage, onstage. So you can get the whole experience of all the elements that go into a theatrical production and learn from that."

"As much as I love the movies," Kharfen continued, "there's nothing that substitutes for that human connection that you make when you're in live theater, and that you're seeing a unique performance that is never the same way again. And you got to be there for that moment."