



Michael Fortuna | Daily Sun
Joyce Schenk, from left, Barb Pearson, John Pearson and Tony Oteri rehearse a scene from "The Long Weekend" Sept. 25 at Mulberry Grove Recreation.

Comedy Arises When 2 Couples Settle In For A 'Long Weekend'

The Villages Theater Company will present the Norm Foster comedy at 7 p.m. Oct. 16-19.

By MICHAEL FORTUNA
Daily Sun Staff Writer

The Villages Theater Company has found a winning formula when it comes to presenting comedic plays. His name is Norm Foster.

The resident theater troupe has put on several of Foster's plays through the years, including its next play, "The Long Weekend."

"He's the Neil Simon of Canada," said Ken Hoffmann, who with his wife, Caroline, is directing the play.

"He's very funny," said Tony Oteri, one of the actors in the upcoming production. "He doesn't look for cheap laughs." "Everything's quick with the back-and-forth," added John Pearson, one of the actors. "It's not full of long, drawn-out lines."

The comedy came to life at 7 p.m. Oct. 16-19 at Mulberry Grove Recreation and will feature four actors.

"They've had to learn a lot of lines, but they're doing a super job," Ken said.

"I haven't been in a show in three years," Joyce Schenk said. "I really worked at it daily."

Because there are only four people on stage, the amount of dialogue has increased between them from a play with a larger cast.

In the play, Max and Wynn (John and Barb Pearson) invite Roger and Abby (Oteri and Schenk) up to their new country retreat for the weekend.

Wynn is a psychologist who likes to analyze everybody, but not directly to their faces.

"The dialogue is quick back-and-forth," said Barb, of the Village of Chatham. "They set up to some snappy jokes."

Max is a lawyer who can be a bit persnickety about things. "He wonderfully plays both sides of every person," John said. "It's constantly back and

forth. He's so proud of himself. He smiles a lot."

Roger is an ex-teacher whose plans to become a screenwriter keep stalling, while Abby has an inflated ego. "She's very two-faced about what she really thinks," said Schenk, of the Village of Duval. "I have some really funny lines. I get to be very superficial and treat my husband with so much disrespect."

"I like that Roger is an everyman kind of guy," Oteri said.

While Wynn and Abby have been friends since high school, some cracks in their relationship begin to show. And they come to discover that Roger and Max despise each other.

"(Roger) pretends to like Max," Oteri said. "He's a bit of a phony in Act I."

"Nobody's happy," Ken said. "One character says, 'This weekend's going to make a colonoscopy look like a light-hearted treasure hunt.'"

When the second act starts, some time has passed, and the quartet meets up again, but a few changes have occurred in the interim.

"It's so goofy," Schenk said.

The Hoffmanns were reading several scripts that they might like to direct when they discovered "The Long Weekend."

"We laughed out loud when we were reading it," said Ken, of the Village of Caroline. "There's just a lot of humor."

The Hoffmanns have directed five plays for the VTC, as well as acted in a few productions. The duo also has directed productions for The Villages Musical Theater and the Melon Patch Players.

Ken, who is legally blind, relies on Caroline to see what's happening on stage, while he listens to how the actors are saying their lines.

"I tell people, we've been married for 40 years, and she's directed me for 40 years," Ken said. "It's amazing how much we're in sync."

Tickets for the play are \$15-25 online at thevillagesstheatercompany.com, as well as \$17-27 by phone at 888-849-4882 or at the door.

Smash Productions To Present 2 Compelling Performances

"A Heroes' Tribute" and "A Haunted Theatre" take the stage at Savannah Center later this month.

By MICHAEL FORTUNA
Daily Sun Staff Writer

Smash Productions celebrates its 10th anniversary with two unique performances during a span of four days — one putting the spotlight on military and first responders, the other getting into the spirit of Halloween with a few old friends.

"It's exciting to see that, to reach a milestone like that," group founder and producer Susan Feinberg said.

First up, Pinky Bigley will debut "A Heroes' Tribute" at 7 p.m. Tuesday and 2 p.m. Oct. 14 at Savannah Center.

It's a one-woman show celebrating those who serve and protect the public, drawing from more than four years of interviews Bigley did with people in those positions.

Joining Bigley on stage is a five-piece band featuring musical director Lina Koutrakos and pianist Ron Drotos, both of whom are flying down from New York to be a part of the concert. The other musicians worked with Bigley in some of Alex Santoriello's productions.

Throughout the show, she will weave the soldiers' and first responders' stories and photos into a variety of songs from the 1960s to the present.

"It's not all military, it's not patriotic," said Bigley, of the Village of Desoto. "It's honoring the members of the military and first responders. It's not your normal concert. It's an uplifting show. The stories I tell are not doom and gloom."

At one point, Bigley reads a letter she spotted at Eisenhower Recreation in which a prisoner of war is writing to his wife. Through discussions with the band, Bigley decided to start off with singing "P.S. I Love You," then reading the letter, then ending with "Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree."

Bigley spent four years putting the show together. The idea arrived when she spent three months as a performer with the USO up in the New York area. After the events of 9/11, she struck up conversations with first responders and military personnel.

She continued collecting tales after moving to The Villages. The majority of these stories make up what the audience will hear in the show.

"When people leave the theater, I hope they carry with them a sense of gratitude, pride and inspiration," Bigley said. "These stories remind



Submitted photo
The cast of Smash Productions dress up as the Addams Family as part of its upcoming show, "The Haunted Theatre," which takes place Oct. 15-16 at Savannah Center.

us that heroes on many levels are all around us. If audience members leave with a fuller heart and a deeper appreciation for the men and women who serve our country and our communities, then I've accomplished what I set out to do."

A portion of the proceeds of "A Heroes' Tribute" will go to Villages Honor Flight and the Tri-County Women Veterans. Next up, the Savannah Center stage becomes "The Haunted Theatre" at 7 p.m. Oct. 15-16.

Feinberg asked Barry Corlew if he would like to write and direct a Halloween show for Smash Productions. He initially said "no," but Feinberg gave him a couple of days to think it over.

"I've worked in theaters, and I've worked in some that were haunted," Corlew said. "Why don't I write about a haunted theater? As soon as I told her that, the whole thing fell into place."

Instead of a plot, Corlew put together a series of distinct scenes. The only connection is that the songs came from big-budget musicals that featured scary situations. "Every song and piece is its own act," said Corlew, of the Village of Amelia. "Each song has a twist to it. It's not quite what you remember."

Some of the songs include "Stones" from "Pippin," "Jekyll and Hyde," "Hocus Pocus," "The Addams Family," "Beetlejuice" and "The Rocky Horror Picture Show."

Toward the end of Act I, members of Thrill The Villages will bring back from the dead the iconic dance from Michael Jackson's "Thriller."

The crew will decorate the stage to resemble an old, run-down, haunted theater, complete with crumbling columns, torn curtains and cobwebs. They also will have on stage a lone ghost light that doesn't quite stay on throughout.

Corlew brought back 18 lead

actors from previous shows to perform, as well as five students from The Villages Charter School.

"I didn't hold an audition," he said. "I told them at the first rehearsal, 'You guys auditioned for this when you did a Smash production before.'"

Corlew has been a part of Smash Productions since its inception, where he was a part of its initial USO-style show. He has directed several shows, and he helped write and direct "The Honeymooners Return To The Villages."

"I am so pleased that I was given the real creative freedom to do this," Corlew said. "The audience has never seen anything like this."

Tickets for the performances are \$39 and up, and are available at any Villages Box Office location or online at thevillagesentertainment.com.

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