

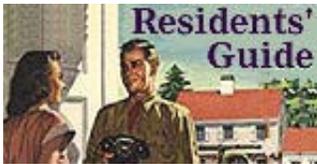


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Colonial Players program designed for the young and the young at heart

By MARY GRACE GALLAGHER, Staff Writer

Crammed into the narrow lobby between the staircase and the entrance to the Colonial Players' newly painted stage are 19 of the wiggliest, giggliest, silliest actors around.



By John Gillis -- the Capital
Joe Thompson works on a musical number with the 'Kids Cabaret' performers.

And standing tall in the middle of the roiling mass is Joe Thompson, 47, whose job it is to turn these wiggles into a respectable performance worthy of one of the most celebrated community theaters in the region. Appropriately, Mr. Thompson has also got the wiggles. And the giggles.

In fact, he's down on the floor now, kicking his legs up in the air, doing the "Centipede Dance."

"Let's use a little bit of grace and a little bit of elegance here, guys," he says, pulling himself up, cranking the music and commanding this troupe to start "from the top."

For the moment, at least, the dancers are moving in sync.

Now in its third year, the Colonial Players' "Kids Cabaret" is sauntering on stage with a newly minted compact disc and a whole new playbill of silly, sunny skits. And of course there's the cast of children and adults, all yearning for their moment in the spotlight.

"What I like best is being there onstage and knowing that everyone is watching me," said Michelle Farley, 11, who has been in every Kids Cabaret since the first, which was launched in 1998 during Colonial Players' 50th anniversary season.

Mr. Thompson coordinates, writes the music and creates the promotional material for the cabaret on the condition that the program remains free. That's free from tyrannical tryouts, free for participants who spend five weeks in rehearsals and, finally, free for the audience that packs the small theater night after night. This year, performances have

been doubled to number six and will be spread out over two weekends, July 28-30 and Aug. 4-6.

"I think of this as a way of paying back a debt to the theater," said Mr. Thompson, who credits Colonial Players for giving his creative energy an outlet for almost 30 years.

"It's a wonderful community of people who are very accepting of all things creative and different," he said. "It really guided me through some rough years."

For the past decade, however, Colonial Players did little with youth theater, besides casting a few children in its annual rendition of "A Christmas Carol."

With a graying volunteer base, the theater needed an infusion of new blood.

"Some of us will be hitting the other end at some point and we need some kids in here," said JoAnn Gidos, whose children and grandchildren have joined her working backstage at the theater.

Professional stage actor Stan Morrow has joined Mr. Thompson in the cabaret each year as a friend and adviser.

"As a community theater we need to reach out to all members of the community. This adds a whole new dimension," said Mr. Morrow, who, in his 70s, is the oldest cabaret kid onstage.

Mr. Thompson, whose musical style blends Garrison Keillor's storytelling with Raffi's catchy rhythms, easily stepped into the role.

He brought with him his wife, Susie Collins, and 8-year-old twins, Martin and Leslie, who are in the show.

"Even the grown-ups in the show are like kids," Ms. Collins said. About a decade ago, Ms. Collins, a school teacher, began inviting her husband into her class to provide musical accompaniment for her lessons. Mr. Thompson, who works as a graphic artist for the county schools, obliged, and started putting his own poetry to music.

"He's a real Renaissance man. He writes. He sings and draws," Ms. Collins said. "He's got his own little fan club (at the theater)."

Like his Lake Wobegon prototype, Mr. Thompson is a king of improvisation. So much so that during this rehearsal, Mr. Thompson -- who wrote and sang the 17 songs on the new recording -- forgets the lyrics.

"Whoa guys, what's next?" he asks, his smile broad. "Who's heads and who's tails?"

The children laugh with him and then obediently step into place.

"They listen to him because they want the show to be good and they know he's a very talented man," says Lisa Farley, mother of Michelle and Jocelyn, 8, who are both in the show. They also sang on the locally produced compact disc, "Every Kind of Magic."

The Farley children were among the 30 youngsters that Mr. Thompson brought with him to the recording studio earlier this year to record snappy tunes like "I Believe in Imagination," "Sticky Fingers" and "Centipede Dance." Almost all of the songs started out as poetry and were originally performed in one of the previous years' cabarets.

"Uncle Joe is a whole lot of fun," said Michelle, whose parents are old friends of the Thompsons'. "He's just a kid at heart."

Perhaps that's why Mr. Thompson knows that, eventually, the arms and sneaker-clad feet kicking and flailing in the air in front of him will have fluidity and rhythm. By show time, words to songs are always memorized; dance steps staged.

Surely by then the "Kids Cabaret" he and his family have been working on since January will be ready for an audience.

In the meantime, there is music, chaos and fun.-----

Tickets for "Kids Cabaret" are free and available by calling the Colonial Players box office at 410-268-7373. Performances will be held at 7 p.m. July 28 and 29 and Aug. 4 and 5, and at 3 p.m. July 30 and Aug. 6.

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