

The Right Way

Written by Mark Shaffer
Tuesday, 30 March 2010 13:29

Operations Manager Scott Johnson hopes True West points ETV Lowcountry in a brand new direction



Mark Shaffer: This production of *True West* is the first play ever performed in the ETV Lowcountry Studios, correct?

Scott Johnson: That's right.

MS: How did this come together?

SJ: Some months ago we started meeting with community leaders – folks like Beaufort Mayor Billy Keyserling, Jane Upshaw from USCB, Jeff Evans and others who wanted to help ETV. Local writer Teresa Bruce, who used to do the news in this building, was instrumental in organizing this effort. People knew we were in a jam because of what was going on with state budget cuts and we were looking for creative ways to stay relevant within the community. I got to know Jeff and learned a lot about what he was involved in and when the time came to do this play, Tom's brother Bob suggested they consider the WJWJ studios. Jeff called me up, they came over and had a look at the facility. They thought it would be a neat thing to do the play in what wouldn't be a typical venue. And here we are.

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MS: What was your first reaction when they said they wanted to do a Sam Shepard play?

SJ: I wasn't familiar with it so I needed to study it a little bit. I'm not a big theater guy, so I'm not all that well versed in it, and reading the play didn't really do much for me. But seeing them rehearse, hearing them run lines for the first time, I was rolling. It's funny stuff and both Jeff and Tom are hilarious in the way they play off of each other and that got me excited about it. I've already told a lot of people they've got to come see this show.

MS: And the level of this production is really extraordinary. I wouldn't venture a guess as to how much combined stage and film experience this cast represents, and we're sitting here looking at a set built by one of the most sought after scenic artists working in the film industry.

SJ: We are blessed. Typically, a lot of the small community theater productions that I've seen the sets were mostly scenic flats, a couple of boards nailed together and painted. Jim comes in and does this fantastic work – and it's real. It's amazing. The craftsmanship is unbelievable. He's built a real environment for these actors to work in and I think that's going to carry over and make it more authentic and relevant to the folks sitting in the audience.

MS: And this will be an intimate experience for the audience, as well. This is not a big house.

SJ: That's right and I think that's what Jeff and Tom were looking for when they decided to come here. They were looking for a venue that would get people up close to the stage and put those 80 or 85 people right next to the action instead of being in some place that seats 500. In this situation everyone's within 25 or 30 feet of the stage. It's going to get people right where they sit.

MS: Do you think we can keep the ball rolling on this sort of thing at WJWJ?

SJ: I think so. I think anytime you have people [who can spread the word] like Jeff and Jim and Tom you're in good shape. People are going to come and see this and go back out in the

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community and say, "Guess what I saw at ETV Lowcountry?" and the buzz is going to build. I hope it gets people thinking about other ways to use us. We are here for the community. I hope it'll trigger them to think of creative, out-of-the-box ways that this facility and our talents can be used to benefit the local community.

MS: With the annual state budget ax once again looming this July, what sort of message does the success of this effort send to the powers-that-be in Columbia?

SJ: I hope it makes them feel that the last thing we need to do is cut this facility because we're doing something relevant and notable in the community. I hope this makes it a little less likely we'll be a target when they pull out the red pens.

For more information on WJWJ and ETV Lowcountry contact Scott Johnson by phone at 843-524-0808 or by email at sjohnson@scetv.org