

Keeping up with Jeff Sanders

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Jeff Sanders

The wonder is that Jeff Sanders isn't fried flat-on-his-face frazzled.

Beyond being artistic director of the Howmet Summer Theatre Festival, the 31-year-old Sterling Heights native also is directing the 2009 season's first three productions: "All in the Timing," which during this Fourth of July weekend opened the nine-week schedule; "The Woman in Black," a ghost story running through Saturday; and "The Underpants," a comedy by Steve Martin, set for July 23-25.

In addition, Sanders will perform in two festival shows at Howmet Playhouse in Whitehall, "The Underpants" and another comedy, "Almost, Maine."

As artistic director, Sanders chose the season's shows, cast the productions, which included holding local auditions for West Michigan actors, and hired the technical staff.

Thrown in other asides -- fundraising, being a promotional presence in the White Lake community -- and it all adds up to way beyond double duty.

"It is a little crazy," Sanders said Thursday morning, in Montague over a monster cup of Presson at The Book Nook & Java Shop. "I'm not going to say it's the best way to do things, because I don't necessarily think it's the best way to do things."

"But the smartest decision I made, coming in -- that's saving my back -- is that I made sure I wasn't going to try to do it alone."

Theater is a collaborative effort. Despite what some actors -- defined cynically as hams baking in a love affair with themselves -- might boast, no one in the live theater does anything by themselves, at least not if they plan on doing it very well.

"I decided that even if I was going to direct the first three, I was not going to carry the complete weight of creativity on my shoulders," Sanders said. "So I begged and borrowed from my friends, and got them around to help me carry it."

Sanders' support group includes Jeremy Meier, his longtime friend from high school and Central Michigan University, who introduced Sanders to theater and is directing "Almost, Maine"; and actress Hayley Clark, whom Sanders met when both were performing with the Cincinnati (Ohio) Shakespeare Company.

"Those are two people I intrinsically trust as actors," Sanders said. "They can carry a play."

Add to Sander's inner circle production manager Brad Dell, with whom Sanders attended graduate school, who's "got tons of experience," who is "one of the best directors I've ever worked with," and who "I can use in whatever capacity I need him for."

Bottom line: "The support system is making it happen. It's truly an exercise in collaboration."

Sanders' current sojourn in West Michigan is a homecoming. He first acted at Howmet Playhouse while touring with CMU's summer theater program.

From 2002-2003 and also in 2006, Sanders acted in such Howmet summer-stock shows as "The Foreigner," "Dearly Departed," "Don't Dress for Dinner," "The Fourposter," "The Nerd," "Bullshot Crummond" and "The Odd Couple."

One of the most significant was "The Fourposter," in which Sanders played opposite his wife, Sara Goff. Goff, another CMU alum, also returns to Howmet this summer for "The Underpants."

Howmet Playhouse served as a matchmaker. Sanders and Goff met on the CMU campus in Mount Pleasant, but, Sanders said, "coming here is where we became more than friends."

During the year, Sanders and Goff teach at Eastern Washington University, near the city of Spokane.

When the Howmet Summer Theatre Festival concludes Aug. 28, they intend to get in some beach-and-family time before returning West for the school year.

Summer stock looks like a lark: Lightweight, seersucker fare that appears to come off with the ease of Merlin waving his magician's wand.

In truth, Howmet's resident summer shows -- as opposed to productions imported from outside -- receive little more than one week of rehearsal before, bam, opening night. What seems to appear with little effort comes soaked with sweat.

"It's our job to make things look easy," Sanders said. "But it's a ton of time. It's a lot of work. But the people who are coming in here knew what they were getting into. They've done it before. I knew we could do it, as long as we had people I knew could shoulder the burden of creativity with me. I knew we'd be all right."

Sanders is no stranger to tough schedules. During four years with the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, his roles included the title character in "Titus Andronicus," Lopakhin in Russian playwright Anton Chekov's "The Cherry Orchard," Mitch in Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire," and a bunch more, among them a total of around "15 or 16" Shakespeare productions.

"That place makes your stamina as an actor pretty strong," Sanders said. "And that's one other reason I'm surviving OK here.

"That place makes your chops very sharp. They have to be, because sometimes you're doing a show of 'Macbeth' in the morning, going into rehearsal for 'Troilus and Cressida' in the afternoon, and you're performing 'A Streetcar Named Desire' in the evening. ... Which is cool, but it's crazy."

So how hard can it be dancing the Howmet Hustle?

"We call it kamikaze theater."

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