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Community theaters in Northeast Ohio draw talented actors who work for the love of the stage

By **Chuck Yarborough, The Plain Dealer**

April 25, 2010, 12:00AM



John Kuntz, The Plain Dealer

Rob Gibb, foreground, who plays Herbie, the agent and love interest for Madame Rose in "Gypsy," belts out one of his numbers in rehearsal for the Brecksville Theatre on the Square production.

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PREVIEW

"Gypsy"

What: Brecksville Theatre on the Square presents the musical story based on the memoirs of burlesque queen Gypsy Rose Lee, starring Monica Olejko as matriarch Rose Hovick and Bridget Chebo in the title role. Directed by Geoffrey Short, with musical direction by Georgiann Bodle and choreography by Katie Kocik.

When: Opens at 7:30 p.m. Friday, April 30. Runs at 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 2 p.m. Sundays through May 16.

Tickets: \$12; \$10, seniors 65 and older and students through high school.

Information: 440-526-3443 or go to [Btots.org](#).

Geoff Short's mama was mad.

Geoff was a latchkey kid, on his own while his single mom went to work. And here he'd gone and done it again: He'd made their garage a shambles by turning it into a theater to stage a show he'd written, starring every kid in the community he could corral.

Here it is a few years later, and a 44-year-old Geoff Short is still rounding up kids in the community to be in shows. Only it's not in his mama's garage, or at the one in the house he shares in Berea with his wife, Lisa, and daughters Michael and Bailey.

The love of theater that drove Short to pull his "Our Gang"-worthy stunts and "put on a show" survives in him and the vast and loyal pool of local talent that could "go pro" but happily chooses to perform in the local playhouses that blanket Northeast Ohio.

More than 30 of those houses dot the scenery here, bringing "Our Town" and "Arsenic and Old Lace," "Up the Down Staircase" and "Twelve Angry Men" and "The Producers" to the theaterati who like to think outside of the idiot box for their entertainment.

by [johnbasalla](#)

Some are larger, such as the Cassidy Theatre in Parma Heights; some have storied pasts, such as the venerable Chagrin Valley Little Theatre in Chagrin Falls. Some do a couple of shows a year, like the Near West Theatre on Cleveland's West Side, and some are prolific, like Huntington Playhouse in Bay Village, which churns out seven or so shows a year.

The budgets under which these houses operate are as varied as the shows they produce and the spaces they occupy, Short said.

Theaters have to make enough to cover production staff, royalties, set construction and rent. A full-scale musical can cost as much as \$20,000 to stage, for example. So theater budgets can range from a few thousand dollars to hundreds of thousands of dollars, he said.

Thankfully, plenty of Northeast Ohioans are still willing to surrender to their inner Spanky, Alfalfa and Darla for a chance to become someone else for two-night shows and a matinee a week, four times a year.

While their numbers may not be as great as a few decades ago -- as Short noted, there are too many other options for time today -- those who do are passionate about it, and will travel large distances several times a week for the privilege.

Short's current production, "Gypsy," which opens at Brecksville Theatre on the Square on Friday, has a large cast whose hometowns range from Parma Heights to Amherst. It's a perfect example of community theater in Northeast Ohio.

Monica Olejko, who lives in Lorain County and teaches dance in Berea, is one of those cast members. Watching rehearsals, it's sometimes difficult to see whether she is stage mother Rose Hovick . . . or stage mother Rose Hovick is "Mo" Olejko. Even her public Facebook profile has a bit of that Rose attitude: "I have a hard time compromising; then again, I'm hardly ever wrong."

Popular musicals pay for other shows

That is one reason why Short recruited her for this project, critical to Brecksville on the Square. Musicals are the money tree for most theaters, said Short, who spent two years as head of the board of Cassidy in Parma Heights.

Popular ones such as "Gypsy" and "Nunsense" draw the crowds -- and their accompanying dollars -- that make it possible to stage other shows throughout the year. "You see 'Annie' over and over because it works" is how Short put it.

"Royalties are based on a number of factors: size of the theater, number of performances, ticket prices, etc.," Short wrote in an e-mail. "Musicals are always more expensive (musicians are paid, not volunteers) and the 'surefire' hits (i.e., 'Sound of Music,' 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat,' etc.) are usually the most expensive.

"For a theater like Brecksville Theatre on the Square, I know that 'Gypsy' royalties were close to \$3,000. At the larger Cassidy Theatre, [Stephen] Sondheim's 'Assassins' . . . was closer to \$2,000.

"For a musical, you can count on at least a couple thousand in royalties alone. Plays are probably half that," Short wrote.

So if you're going to spend money to make money -- or at least enough to cover expenses -- you need the best. That's the other reason Short went for Olejko as Madame Rose.

At 59, she exudes a dancer's lithe grace, packaged with a nun's ruler-wielding insistence on getting things right, which comes from having spent much of her own theater career in the director's chair.

Even now, as she is rehearsing for her "Gypsy" role, Olejko is directing and choreographing "West Side Story" for Elyria High School. That show opened Friday.

Nonprofessional actors chose a different path

Olejko is a special talent, but she is by no means Northeast Ohio's lone talent, said Short, who has directed dozens of plays at area theaters and performed as a singer and actor in even more.

His "day job" as marketing and promotions manager at Jerry Bruno Productions, the area's largest musical-entertainment agency, also provides insight into what's out there.



Monica Olejko is Mama Rose.

Geoff Short

"There are many performers, especially in Cleveland, which is NOT Podunk," Short said. "Cleveland is a big market. With PlayhouseSquare being the second-largest performing arts center in the country, we've got a lot of talent here.

"Some of that talent has chosen not to become 'professional' actors or performers, or have just chosen a different career path. But they happen to be just as talented and just as passionate about performing or producing theater as someone who has chosen to go to New York and try to make it on Broadway," he said.

Olejko is one of those people, according to Short. She's also a veteran director herself, at professional theaters such as the Beck Center for the Arts in Lakewood and at community theaters. For Short, who realized the "Gypsy" cast was going to have to be large, diverse and young, the idea of having someone who's spent time as the boss was kind of like having a veteran football player who's a coach on the field.

Olejko wasn't quite so sure. Because it's been a few years since she's been on the business side of the curtain, "I wasn't sure I was directable."

But the desire to be onstage apparently never goes away.

"There are two reasons," she said in an early rehearsal as Short was leading his cast through the initial blocking of the show. "The applause fills a lot of gaps, and it's a wonderful social thing."

And it is. That's one reason why people will travel the distances they do.

"I'm always amazed at where people will travel from," said Short.

Those distances and other demands on potential players' time are probably the key challenges that community-theater administrators, directors and producers face, he said.

"Back in the '70s and '80s, participation in a community theater show was a big deal," said Short. "You got the best talent from all over the region because there wasn't as much to do, and certainly not as many venues, as many theaters, as many entertainment options as there are now."

An audition today is likely to draw maybe 20 people at best, he said. With that in mind, savvy directors like Short "try to adjust rehearsal schedules and become very organized at creating schedules so people can afford to be in a show."

A typical community-theater production is in rehearsal for six to eight weeks, from 7 to 9 p.m. three nights a week. It's a lot different in the pro world.

"I just finished being in a production, 'The Blue Door' at Dobama Theatre," he said. "The rehearsal schedule was one where it was short in time -- about a month -- so it was every night, which was difficult.

"But you're being compensated for that," he said. "Community theater is a very different animal."

"Different" as in not getting paid -- although occasionally, a community theater board will permit the casting of an actor who is a member of the professional union, the Actors' Equity Association, if the director, who is almost always hired and not a volunteer, begs loudly and often enough.

Short and other community-theater directors understand they're working with people who are doing what they're doing on a volunteer basis, and he tries to structure his rehearsal schedule around that.

"I have two teenagers, I'm married and I work full time, and everybody else does, too," Short said.

"With my shows, babies are welcome. Children are welcome. Spouses and parents, too. The whole idea of community theater is *community*. . . . It should be as inclusive as possible to everyone in the community," he said.

And even as families are microcosmic communities within a community, there are communities within a show. Watching "Gypsy" rehearsals, where hugs and laughter are more common than blown lines or missed blocking assignments, that's apparent.



Courtesy of Geoff Short

Bridget Chebo goes from gangly no-talent tomboy Louise to sexy siren Gypsy Rose Lee in "Gypsy," the musical opening this week at Brecksville Theatre on the Square.

'We do it because we have to'

"An actor is an actor," said Olejko. "You can't explain it to someone who is not an actor why they do it. We don't do it because we want to. We do it because we have to."

Mike Pitt, who plays multiple roles in this production of "Gypsy," is one of those. The Sagamore Hills resident discovered theater in his 40s, two decades ago. Pitt was averaging three shows a year, most in nearby community theaters but a few at some of the professional houses, such as the now-defunct Carousel Dinner Theatre.

Bridget Chebo, who Short said is among several in his cast gifted enough to pursue a professional stage career, is Louise, the gangly girl who grows up to be Gypsy Rose Lee.

It's almost as interesting to watch a like transition in the actress's confidence from the opening days of rehearsals, when she seemed every bit as shy and retiring as her character, to the days before final run-throughs.

If that growth isn't the intent of Short's incredibly detailed rehearsal schedule books -- which break each night into 15-minute "now-we-do-this, now-we-do-that" segments -- it's certainly a byproduct.

"She could easily do this for a living," said Olejko, who might know a thing or two about such things.

Her son appeared in a show with his mom as a kid years ago. Today, Dan Folino is an Equity actor working at the Barter Theatre in Abingdon, Va., the oldest regional theater in the United States. Olejko's daughter, Amanda Recko, also does community theater and works as a professional choreographer for Cedar Point.



So in a way, it's all come full circle. Geoff Short got his start putting on shows in his garage and is still doing it; Dan Folino got his watching his mom perform, and finally deciding to go at it himself.

Mama Olejko, Madame Rose and Mama Short should be proud.

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