



A peak inside the curtain of
**COMMUNITY
THEATER**
in Montgomery County

BY SETOTA HAILEMARIAM

When Amanda Brooke Wesley heard the Little Rockville Theater was holding auditions for “The Miser,” she decided to take a chance. “I had never done anything outside of school-related stuff for theater until that audition,” Wesley says. “I was pretty nervous because it had been several years since I graduated college and I had done no acting since then.”

She landed the female lead of Mariane, the woman fought over by a father and son in the play that dates back to 17th century France.

That experience in 2014 led her to explore different community theaters in the area, and she’s been involved ever since. Next month she will appear in the “Canterville Ghost” with Montgomery

Playhouse, the county’s oldest community theater company.

“I enjoy how performing makes me feel,” Wesley says. “It makes me get out of my shyness, it makes me put on a delightful evening for people in our community...I enjoy the people that I meet there.”

Since Montgomery Playhouse opened its first production in 1929, community theater in Montgomery County has been a vibrant scene. There are now more than a dozen troupes offering everything from opera to serious plays to whimsical musicals every season. But just because the actors aren’t paid or classically trained and almost everyone involved is a volunteer, don’t think community theater isn’t up to professional standards.

WHO'S WHO IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY COMMUNITY THEATER

Theater company	Location	Where to see them	Up next / 2017-18 season
Bethesda Little Theatre www.bltonline.org	Bethesda	Traveling company	Let's Not Talk About Love
Damascus Theatre Company www.damascustheatre.org	Damascus	Olney Theatre, Gaithersburg Arts Barn, Damascus United Methodist Church	The Little Mermaid, The Bridges of Madison County
Forum Theatre www.forum-theatre.org	Silver Spring	Silver Spring Black Box Theatre	Love and Information, The State, Nat Turner in Jerusalem
Highwood Theatre, The www.thehighwoodtheatre.org	Silver Spring	Highwood Theatre	The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940
Kensington Arts Theatre Group www.katonline.org	Kensington	Kensington Town Hall/Town Center	The Bridges of Madison County Steel Magnolias, You're a Good Man Charlie Brown
Live Garra Theatre www.livegarratheatre.org	Silver Spring	Silver Spring Black Box Theatre	Fool in Love, The Frankie Lymon Story
Lumina Studio Theatre www.luminastudio.org	Silver Spring	Lumina Studio Theatre	Much Ado About Nothing
Montgomery Playhouse www.montgomeryplayhouse.org	Germantown	Montgomery Playhouse	Unavailable
Olney Theatre Center www.olneytheatre.org	Olney	Olney Theatre Center	In the Heights, Our Town, Annie, Aubergine, Every Brilliant Thing, The Crucible, On the Town, Pirates of Penzance
Rockville Little Theatre www.rlt-online.org	Rockville	F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre	Almost Maine, Underpants, Radium Girls
Rockville Musical Theatre www.r-m-t.org	Rockville	F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre, Gaithersburg Arts Barn	White Christmas, Altar Boyz, Anything Goes, Brigadoon
Round House Theatre www.roundhousetheatre.org	Bethesda	Round House Theatre	In the Heights, I'll Get You Back Again, Book of Will, Handbagged, Slopy Firsts, Master Herald, Legend of Georgia McBride
Sandy Spring Theatre Group www.sandyspringtheatregroup.org	Sandy Spring	Gaithersburg Arts Barn	Unavailable
Silver Spring Stage www.ssstage.org	Silver Spring	Silver Spring Stage, Woodmoor Shopping Center	Deathtrap, Ominum, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, Wit, All in the Timing, The (Curious Case of the) Watson Intelligence A Delicate Balance, The House of Blue Leaves
Victorian Lyric Opera Company www.vloc.org	Rockville	F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre	Chris and the Wonderful Lamp, The Merry Widow, Patience
Wildwood Summer Theatre www.wst.org	Bethesda	Good Counsel High School, Gaithersburg Arts Barn	Spring Awakening
Upcounty Theatre www.upcountytheatre.org	Germantown	BlackRock Center	Love/Sick

"I would never think of community theater being worse or better than professional theater," says Loretto McNally, artistic director at Montgomery Playhouse. "The difference between community and professional is a paycheck. I've seen many soaring performances presented on well-appointed sets with beautiful costumes and imaginative lighting in community theaters. I've also seen some stinkers. The same applies to many professional productions I've seen."

Montgomery Playhouse, Olney Theatre, Round House Theatre, Silver Spring Stage, and others have achieved outstanding reputations throughout the metropolitan area. *DC Metro Theater Arts* called Olney Theatre's summer production of "My Fair Lady" a "brilliant reimagining of this classical musical." *The Washington Post* recently called the Round House Theatre "one of the most important outposts in the region for provocative, high-end drama."

Even smaller companies like Damascus Theater Company have proven their theater mettle. In 2016, DTC received five Washington Area Theater Community Honors, four for its production of “The Drowsy Chaperone” and one for “Children of Eden.”

Producers, actors and almost everyone involved say the vibrancy and quality of community theater in Montgomery County is as good as almost anywhere.

Carol Boyle, executive producer of the DTC, says the company draws actors and personnel from throughout Maryland, D.C., and Virginia.

“I think another great example of the vibrancy in theater here is that we’ve seen an increase in the number of actors auditioning for shows,” Boyle says. “We had close to 100 people come out for our most recent auditions.”

Amateur theater has entertained the citizenry since ancient times. In Montgomery County it can be traced to 1929, when Montgomery Playhouse, now the oldest continuously performing community theater in the Washington area and the second-oldest in Maryland, staged its first production. In 1965 Goldie Hawn performed there in “A Shot in the Dark” with fellow volunteer and later Tony and Emmy-award winner George Grizzard.

While some go on to achieve great things in acting, most appear in community theater productions because they have a passion for theater. Community theater allows people to expand their horizons, get out of their comfort zones and try something they have maybe dreamed of doing but never thought they could.

“I was too scared when I was younger to perform,” says Kevin Belanger, a trail planner for the Rails to Trails Conservancy. “I decided I didn’t want to be scared anymore. At the age of 27, I started doing theater. I’d always been a person who wanted to perform, but I was just so shy. Ultimately, I realized if I want to do it I just have to try.”

Belanger started performing in 2013 with the Rockville Musical Theatre with a small part in the ensemble. He recently played Roger Davis, one of the lead characters in “Rent,” and he performed this summer in the company’s production of “Spamalot.”

“Community theater occupies a peculiarly important position in the American theater picture. ... It engages more people in theatrical activity, albeit part-time, than all the rest of the American theater put together, including schools and colleges,” author Robert Edward Gard wrote in “Theatre in America: Appraisal and Challenge for the

National Theatre Conference.”

In Montgomery County, that has been true for almost 90 years. Montgomery Playhouse was still quite young when the Olney Theatre opened 79 years ago. The Rockville Little Theatre staged its first production in 1948. Silver Spring Stage celebrates its 50th season next year and Round House Theatre is celebrating its 40th. The Bethesda Little Theatre was founded in 1980 and Damascus Community Theater came along five years later. Even into the 21st century, community theater continues to grow. The Kensington Arts Theatre opened in 2002.

“I think for the audience, they realize that these are very talented people; they’re neighbors, not professional actors from New York City,” says Silver Spring Stage board of directors chair Seth Ghitelman. “And to realize how talented they are, and to come have this experience, I think that’s what makes community theater special, that kind of bond with the audience and the actors.”

Even professional theater in the county understands and respects what community theater is all about.

“Even if it’s not a professional performance, there’s still a lot of quality talent, a lot of wonderfully trained people out there,” says Matthew Nicola, artistic director of the Highwood Theatre in Silver Spring, which bills itself as “a professional theater with a community mindset.”

Like most businesses, community theaters are always looking for new talent. Roles in productions are open to anyone. Auditions are usually held about eight weeks before a show opens. If performing on stage isn’t your thing, theaters are also looking for help backstage, ushering, making costumes, building sets, helping with makeup or selling concessions.

“People forget that it takes a lot of administrative work to put on a show,” Ghitelman says.

While residents buy tickets to see the end production, at the core of community theater is building a community through theater.

And while some actors go on to the professional ranks, community theater isn’t like minor league baseball where everyone is trying to get to the next level. A lot of actors are happy putting on productions in their spare time.

“I think if I try to go professional at age 32, I think I’m a little too old for it,” says Belanger. “I don’t really feel a lot of pressure doing this right now; I’m not trying to get paid for it. It’s just fun. And I feel like we’ve built a little family.” ^{MM}