

Footlighters Say 'Blah' Humbug

By Howard McEwen
For The Sunday Challenger
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Troupe Stages First Christmas Musical

NEWPORT - At the corner of Eighth and York Streets in the old Salem United Methodist Church, the Footlighters, a community theatre group, have been staging some of the best productions in the area for the past 20 years. This December, the group will produce its first Christmas play, "Merry Blah Blah."

"Merry Blah Blah" concerns local eggnog entrepreneur Aunt Agatha. Years ago, a younger Agatha was left at the altar by a young man, to whom she never spoke again. As the years passed, the young man who scorned her became well-known and celebrated. The more Aunt Agatha heard of him, the more she learned to hate him and everything he stood for - which included Christmas - because that young man was Santa Claus.

Aunt Agatha eventually gained success on her own, making a treat associated with the very holiday she hated - eggnog. One year, using her famous drink and the mystical power of modern telecommunications, she robs Northern Kentucky and Cincinnati of the ability to pronounce the word "Christmas." When friends greet each other on the street, all they can manage is a garbled "Merry Blah Blah."

Luckily, Aunt Agatha's niece and nephew, Laci and Nicholas, learn of their aunt's plan. They enlist the help of the Christmas Spirit to undo Aunt Agatha's dreadful plot and set everything right again, including Aunt Agatha's heart. Santa Claus also makes an appearance to explain why he was not able to make their wedding.

New for Christmas

Like most of the Footlighters' productions, the story of Aunt Agatha was collaborative.

Lynne Aronson, the play's director and Footlighters board member, thought a Christmas play would be a perfect way to fill the theater with children.

"The theater wasn't doing enough outreach to the community - especially the children," said Aronson.

However, she was without a script so she contacted the Cincinnati Playwright Initiative who put her in touch with Brian Celce.

A native of Canton, Ohio, Celce is an accomplished writer. He has tried his hand at poetry, fiction, nonfiction and screenplays. Though he has written another Christmas play, this is the first one to be produced. He graduated from Asbury College in Wilmore, Ky. with a degree in philosophy and is currently working on his graduate degree in secondary education at the University of Cincinnati.

"The play is not written down to children," said Aronson. "Why write down to children when you can elevate them? It is written with wonderful language. Each of the characters is very distinctive - Agatha in particular has her own leitmotifs."

Together, Celce and Aronson began forming the narrative and roughing out the general plot lines. They then enlisted Aronson's husband Mark, an accomplished musician, to write the music to Celce's words.

Teresa Riestenberg, an experienced local actress, is making her first appearance with the Footlighters playing Aunt Agatha. Many actors from previous productions complete the cast. Paul Hamilton, who just finished "South Pacific," plays the role of Nicholas. Recent Northern Kentucky University graduate Meagan Osborn, who performed in the Footlighters' 1999 production of "Once Upon A Mattress," returns as the Christmas Spirit. Lily Rodgers returns as Laci after her performance as Baby Louise in last fall's "Gypsy."

Building a Theater

The Footlighters had been performing at various locations around Cincinnati since 1963, but made their home in Newport in 1986.



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FULLY CAST: The cast of "Merry Blah Blah" (left to right) Mark Aronson (composer and Santa Claus), Teresa Riestenberg (on couch, Aunt Agatha), Lily Rogers (Lily), Paul Hamilton (Nicholas) and Meagan Osborn (Christmas Spirit) in rehearsal.

The year before, a tornado hit the church and sent the steeple plummeting through the roof, crashing through the church's foyer and into the basement. Daunted by the cost of repairs, the small congregation merged with another church and the building was put up for sale.

The Footlighters saw an opportunity. They bought the building, repaired the floor, installed sprinklers and brought the electrical up-to-date. The former church was christened The Stained Glass Theatre and has been home to many shows, including "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," "Grease," "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" and "Steel Magnolias." Now, a 163-seat theater occupies the building's second floor. The Gallery Stage, on the first floor where "Merry Blah Blah" will be performed, seats 75.

Next on the schedule is a February production of the farce "Love, Sex, and the IRS," in which two struggling roommates try to outwit the IRS. The season ends with "The Secret Garden" - the Tony Award-winning musical - in May.

Making "Merry"

Performances of "Merry Blah Blah" are Friday, Dec. 2 and 9 at 7:30 p.m., Saturday, Dec. 3 and 10 at 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. and Sunday, Dec. 4 and 11 at 5 p.m. Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$7 for children.

At the Stained Glass Theatre 802 York St., Newport, on the Gallery Stage.

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