

Troupe marks 20 years

Written by Jackie Demaline

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Actors and coaches carved out rehearsal spaces throughout the rabbit warren lower level of Friendship Methodist Church one night recently, where Marjorie Book Continuing Education Society prepared for tonight's opening of Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House."

This year Marjorie Book (MBookCES) celebrates its 20th year of creating theater by bringing people with and without disabilities to the stage with four challenging summer shows at Cincinnati Museum Center's Reakirt Auditorium.

"A Doll's House," the troupe's debut production in 1993, will be performed at 7:30 p.m. tonight and May 24.

At a recent rehearsal led by MBookCES founder and director Joe Link, the camaraderie is palpable among the veteran society members. Most of them had spent the previous weekend at the Flying Pig Marathon, one day walking and one day volunteering.

Ann Lucas of Kennedy Heights has been part of the MBookCES since 1997. Link calls her "a real success story." Initially Lucas struggled to memorize lines. Now she helps other performers learn their lines.

Link is very much a coach who encourages his performers to work to the best of their abilities. "There is a lot of casting against type," Link said, and the amount of movement performers have on stage will fit those abilities. Several cast members will be reading from note cards at the performance.

Link relies on high school and college student volunteers who perform, provide technical support and help disabled actors learn lines. Two students who began working with MBookCES in high school play key roles in "A Doll's House."

Lucas Rutkowski of Loveland is a long-time volunteer and MBookCES' man of all work. His mom Susan was a former president of the non-profit's board, and when he got a call from Link almost four years ago, he signed on. At the rainy night rehearsal, Rutkowski good-naturedly set up a classroom as a rehearsal space, stacking chairs to the side and stepping in for missing actors. At home he works on props and creates the dialogue cards for cast members. Rutkowski said he changed his major to special ed because of his experience with MBookCES. He began his college career at University of Cincinnati-Blue Ash and moves to Northern Kentucky University in the fall.

Audrey Platt will play Nora. Now a sophomore at the College of Wooster, 2013 is Platt's third summer with Marjorie Book. She heard about the program from Anderson High School drama teacher Chad Weddle (recipient of the the 2013 Enquirer/Fifth Third Bank Theatre Educator Award). An English major with a minor in theater, Platt is hoping to teach high school theater. "I thought it would be great theater experience," Platt recalled. "Little did I know that after putting on just one show with this group they would become some of the most important people in my life."

"The commute to our (Wyoming) rehearsal space is not the shortest, but it's completely worth it. Every rehearsal, late night, and trip dragging props to venues is completely worth it. Everybody is endlessly

enthusiastic, talented and kind.” They make the experience genuinely enjoyable!

This year’s line-up is “a bit of an experiment” to mark the anniversary. The four plays have smaller casts so the dozen longtime performers can devote energy to a larger role. .

The goal is to have an equal number of actors with and without disabilities, Link said. This year the ratio is closer to 30/70 with disabilities.

Lakota West student Ally Wimmers was a MBookCES enthusiastic newbie, fulfilling 15 service hours for her government class. Her first hours started by helping Link unload rehearsal material from his car.

Among the many things Link has learned during the last 20 years, Link said, “is given the right support, people with disabilities are able to do a wide range of work in theater.”

How it all started

The idea for a theater project that would bring together a community with and without disabilities was born when Joe Link was a 19-year old student at Xavier University.

He wasn’t a theater guy, but he and some friends decided to put on “A Doll’s House,” about 19th-century wife Nora who comes to realize she’s trapped by her husband and society. They rehearsed in his parents’ Wyoming garage.

One of the actors was blind. “There was a lot of comment,” Link said, and he started calling social service agencies about possible interest in a n integrated theater group that would bring together people with and without disabilities.

There was. Link founded Renegade Garage Players, which started small with one summer production. but “it got larger and larger.” They expanded to three plays over the course of several summers.

Their interests widened, and so much so that In 1999 the Players took on service projects in the community and classes including creative writing and wood-working.

“It took off after 2000,” Link said, “with people wanting to be a part of it.” The name change came in 2008.

Now Link administers Marjorie Book from his office at Xavier, where he is an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Secondary and Special Education. It operates on a \$20,000 annual budget (“we’re dependent on donations,” Link said).

“In ‘93 I would have been skeptical if someone had said we’d still be here 20 years later. But every year it feels as if I’m doing something new.”

Actors with and without disabilities and with and without experience are invited. Contact Joe Link at 513-328-6300 and info@marjoriebook.org.

If you go

What: “A Doll’s House”

When: 7:30 p.m. today and May 24

Marjorie Book Continuing Education Society, Cincinnati Museum Center Reichert Auditorium, 1301 Western Ave., West End.

Tickets: \$10 suggested donation or pay-what-you-can at the door. Parking at Cincinnati Museum Center is \$4 cash or credit per car after 5 p.m. The May 24 performance will include signed interpretation for the deaf. All performances include audio description for the blind.

Upcoming shows: “**Communicating Doors**,” an Alan Ayckborne comedy, June 23 & 29; “**Candida**,” George Bernard Shaw social satire, July 19 & 21; “**The Fifth Sun**,” political and spiritual drama about El Salvadoran Jesuit priest Oscar Romero, Aug. 15, 16 & 18.