

April, 2008

Volume 102, No. 4

The monthly publication of The Mountaineers



The

Mountaineer

www.mountaineers.org



Barb and Scott Baker photo

An old-growth forest preserve and playground for thespians since 1909, the Kitsap Forest Theater continues to draw throngs.

A place where 'stories for all ages come to life'

By Brad Stracener

Twelve years ago, Nancy Estill walked down the winding trail to the Kitsap Forest Theater for the first time. She recalled that though it was March, the sky was cloudless. "The trail was padded with leaves and fir needles blown down by winter storms," she said, "but the sun broke through the canopy, highlighting the swelling buds on the wild rhododendrons."

She said her anticipation grew as the trail ended. "This quarter-mile trail transported me from my everyday life of a mini-van packed with family and camping gear to a magical place where stories for all

ages have come to life for the past 86 years."

As she paused on that day a dozen years ago at the trail's terminus above the terraced amphitheater and surrounded by towering conifers, Estill said she was amazed by



Barb and Scott Baker photo

Rhodies originally drew Mountaineers.

the "pristine beauty of this unique venue." She added, "There were neither curtain nor lights, but there were singing birds, a babbling creek and trillium blooming on stage."

For those who return to the Bremerton area theater year after year, such as Estill—chair of the Players Committee—appreciation for its ambience grows with each subsequent visit. Members of the audience bring children of all ages to picnic under the trees prior to the show and hike to Big Tree—known as the largest living tree on the Kitsap Peninsula. Big Tree is emblematic of the theater itself: coveted and preserved as the world bustles around it.

Brenda Frank, who used to live in a house on the theater grounds, revisited the site recently after being away for several years. "I can't

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Salal, swordferns, salmon and spectators—oh my!

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tell you how thrilled I was to see that not much had changed in all those years since my family lived there,” she wrote in an e-mail to the Players and shared by Players Vice Chair Gala Lindvall. “I recognized each and every turn down the path,” she added. She recollected a walk-on role she played for the Players when she lived there. “I was whisked out onto the stage with my dog to take bows. It was a warm and wonderful day.”

The site has evoked warm feelings from Mountaineers and their guests throughout the club’s history. Hikers from the club stumbled upon what was then called Hidden Valley only a couple years after the club was formed. Between members of the club and the family that first settled there, the Paschalls, funds have been raised and land transfers have been negotiated over the years to preserve what is now some of the last untouched old-growth trees and native rhododendrons in the Puget Sound basin. Reports of the rhododendron blooms were what originally attracted hikers from the

club to Hidden Valley.

Amateur plays and skits between members of The Mountaineers were introduced on the site at the time. Club members soon after began to notice some strangers showing up in their midst. The club was therefore behooved to build a stage there. Later, when the men were off fighting in World War I, the women of the club were instrumental in building the historic Kitsap Cabin, a facility used by the Players and members of the club since 1917. In the late 1990’s, volunteers from The Mountaineers began upgrades and a remodel of the cabin where Players have traditionally taken their rehearsal breaks and conferred.

Over the years, other outsiders have been as equally impressed with the site as those strangers who walked down the Hidden Valley trail to watch the club’s thespians of yesteryear.

Peter Sipos, composer of last year’s musical, “Robin Hood—the Legend Continues,” remembers first casting his eyes upon the forested theater after flying all the way from Montreal to catch opening day.

“After arriving the day before opening, Gala (Lindvall) greeted me and walked me straight down the trail, through the woods, to join the last few minutes of rehearsal,” Sipos recalled. “I was mesmerized by the environment, the magic of the forest and the incredible view of the stage,” he added.

Broadway producer Kary Walker relayed to Lindvall just before last year’s production that “every city



should have a theater like this. I wish all my New York friends could come and see this place.”

For some of those who live in the Pacific Northwest, the Kitsap Forest Theater’s magic resonates from generation to generation. Such is the case for Karen Gentry, a long-time audience member. “My mother and I first started going to Forest Theater productions when I was a junior high (school) student. Dad came along most years. We loved the theater, walking down the trail with the beautiful native rhodies and the woods all around as we watched the old family-friendly musicals,” she stated. “Over the years, I delighted in bringing my own children as soon as they were old enough, and now we also include my grandchildren,” Gentry added.

The preserve, now consisting of over 300 acres, including the 20-acre theater, has indeed nurtured

its share of families over the years. One of the daughters of the Hidden Valley Ranch owner, Edward Paschall, married a Mountaineers member not long after the valley was first visited by the club. Katie McCoy met her husband, Craig, while performing on stage in 1998.

“This is more than a theater in a forest—it’s a place where friendships are formed forever,” McCoy said. “I would have missed a lifetime of memories if I hadn’t dropped by The Mountaineers (building) for auditions to a play one chilly February weekend 10 years ago,” added McCoy. “It truly has been a life-changing experience for me.”

Lynn Moen, a Mountaineer who has made the Players and the preserve part of her life for more than 50 years, echoed McCoy’s sentiments. “Players are like a big family,” she stated. She said the theater is a “wonderful place for kids to meet people of all ages. So close to civilization, yet you feel like you are in another world.”

That world is not only a home to Players but to what drew the club’s hikers to it 100 years ago: the salmonberries, salal, rhododendrons, sword ferns, Oregon grape, huckleberries and the gurgling creeks that still host spawning salmon. Between The Mountaineers and The Mountaineers Foundation, it is hoped Kitsap Forest Theater will be preserved for hundreds of years to come.

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