

# Coach House marks 60th season



Tess Brewer, president of Coach House Players, sings 'Getting to Know You' as Mrs. Anna from 'The King and I.' From left are the king's children played by Heaven Coffey, 11, daughter of Tom and Lynda of Kingston, Julianne Swarhout, 9, daughter of Kevin and Julie of Eddyville, Kaleigh Coffey, 8, and Ryan Coffey, siblings of Heaven.

By ANN GIBBONS

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Terri Dwyer sings 'Edelweiss' as Maria from 'The Sound of Music.'

The sixties are usually a time to mellow out, slow down and enjoy the perks of middle age. Not, however, for the Coach House Players, which celebrates its 60th season of more than 170 performances of comedy, drama and music this weekend with a musical review of all-time faves.

The all-volunteer company has never strayed far from its original purpose: to promote community theater, said long-time member Terri Dwyer during an interview this week.

"WE'VE BEEN able to keep going. Most community theater companies fizzle out after a few years," she observed. Originally named the Footlighters, the company survived its own division in the ranks many

years ago, took its current name and the rest is theatrical urban legend.

The players now perform for the season exclusively in their elegant, former carriage house just around the corner from the house that belonged to one of Kingston's finest first families, the Coykendalls.

THAT WAS not always the case, Dwyer said. She said the original 12 founding members performed first at George Washington Elementary School and later at Bailey Elementary School because both schools had stages and large seating capacity.

"It was difficult," she recalled, "because the company members had to partially construct the sets, then truck them to the school to finish them". By the 1990s, it became harder to schedule productions because the schools had their own programs that needed the space. "So, we started to look around," she said.

THEY DID not need to look too far.

"We already owned the Augusta Street carriage house," Dwyer said, noting that the theater company refocused on its original plan for the facility - to make it a viable theater space. The company hired an architect and began to raise funds. Long-time member George Betts died and left the company a small sum, "so we had our start," Dwyer said.

THEN, ANOTHER serendipitous moment occurred. The Ulster Center for the Performing Arts was installing new seats and gave Coach House Players about 100 seats free.

"We ripped them apart, pulled out the old stuffing and several decades of gum from the seat bottoms," Dwyer recalled with a laugh. Company volunteers then retied the springs, installed new foam cushions and reupholstered the seats with fabric donated by Wonderly Drapery.

"IT WAS like an assembly line. We completed three seats that season," Dwyer said, drawing appreciative laughter from Tess Brewer, president of the board of directors, and Tom Tierney, who is directing the upcoming musical review, during the interview

"We had a production to stage, so we had to stop the assembly line," Dwyer said. She said the next season produced 15 seats, then - finally - 99 were completed. "It took a long time."

Brewer said the seats are not bolted to the floor, and are set on risers so the audience has a clear view of the stage from every row. She said, with the current plan, there are five to six different configurations possible.

Brewer said the 70-member company is governed by a nine-member board of directors, who set the bylaws and the productions for the following season.

"We usually have a musical, a comedy and a drama each season," she said. Brewer noted that performances are directed by company members, who are not paid for the shows. "It's all volunteer," she stressed.

"It gives performers a great chance to direct a production," Tierney said, adding that he's probably directed at least 15 performances over the years that he's been a member.

Dwyer explained that when the company moved its entire production into the 1880s brick carriage house members realized that a fundamental shift in the performing schedule was essential.

"We found out how expensive it was to plow the parking lot," Dwyer said. So, the season now runs April, July, sometimes something in August, with the final show in November.

"We shut down for the winter and reopen in February or March for auditions," Brewer said. Even though the performance space is heated and air conditioned, the second floor, where props and 60 years of costumes are stored, is not.

Renovations to the venerable structure began in 2000 and are ongoing, Brewster said. Some electrical work has just been updated, but new windows, repairing the slate roof and paving the parking lot are on the company's wish list

Every show demands a full complement of personnel - director, assistant director, actors, set designers, costumiers, etc. There's no stinting on necessary production crew and all the slots are filled by volunteers. From the first reading to production, rehearsals take about eight weeks.

Brewster said the company is always seeking new members to fill numerous theater positions, not just acting and directing. Members are asked to volunteer for two productions in three years. Dues are a modest \$10 per year.

Dwyer said funds from performances go to maintaining the building, paying royalties for productions, buying materials as needed for the upcoming season, as well as sponsoring scholarships for high school seniors who are pursuing higher education in the arts. She noted that season ticket holders not only get a reduced rate, but they also provide the company with pre-season funds to get the theatrical year moving forward.

The three agree that their diverse audience has just one overarching requisite: They want to be entertained. Tierney said the company has a vast reservoir of possibilities for every season, so it's not likely audiences will get bored. Occasionally, the company will bring back a perennial favorite, such as "South Pacific" or "Brigadoon," with a different director taking a fresh approach to the production.

Tierney said the routine for the upcoming musical review includes the famous Gene Kelly song, "Singin' in the Rain." "We're going to make it rain on stage for a few minutes," he said mischievously. "We've already hung the tubes on stage," he said, adding that the actors who perform in the routine will get wet.

"Wet? that's all?" Dwyer chimed in. She said she had the once-in-a-lifetime chance to play Peter in "Peter Pan" in another performance space. She said until the stage crew got accustomed to handling the flying apparatus, "I crashed into sets, banged into doors, flew over seats where the audience would sit. I was black and blue," she said.

Dwyer said someone asked her why she was taking on such a hazardous job for no pay.

"Because I love it," she said simply, as Brewer and Tierney nodded in agreement.

The 60th anniversary musical review will be performed at 12 Augusta St. in Kingston at 8 p.m. tonight, Saturday and on Nov. 19 and 20 and at with a 2 p.m. Sunday matinee this week and on Nov. 21.

Tickets are \$18, general admission; \$15, seniors and children under 12; \$44, season ticket.

Further information may be obtained by calling (845) 331-2476 or by visiting [www.coachhouseplayers.org](http://www.coachhouseplayers.org). Directions are on the website.