

Actors descends on Raton for Shuler summer season

By TIM KELLER — For the Comet | Posted: Thursday, May 28, 2015 2:00 am

RATON – Decades from now the annals of Raton’s cultural history may bear a page about the day a troupe of professional actors stepped off the train to spend an entire summer in downtown Raton, producing a season of plays at the Shuler Theater.

When the westbound Southwest Chief from Chicago pulls into Raton Depot before 11 o’clock Tuesday morning (6/2), a few fans and supporters will welcome the company of actors. For many of the actors, it will be their first experience of the mountain West. Guiding them will be Ian McCabe, actor and producing partner of Two Pigs Productions (TPP), who’s returning for his third summer season of acting at the Shuler.

McCabe’s partner in acting and TPP, Nora Leahy, will be among those greeting the dozen or more actors as they step off the train Tuesday. Leahy arrived from Indiana this week. After an adventurous season of repertory theater with McCabe and Leahy last summer, the Santa Fe School for the Performing Arts and the Shuler Theater contracted with TPP to provide this season’s full slate of summer theater at the Shuler.

The season will open June 19-20 with “Variety of Errors,” combining all of the company’s actors with several Raton locals in a night of improvisation and comedy that sounds a lot like Saturday Night Live. A big musical production of “Into the Woods” follows June 25 through July 5. William Shakespeare’s beloved comedy “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” takes the stage July 9-19, followed by the zany comedy “Boeing Boeing.”

A children’s theater camp will offer area kids three 30-hour weeks of work and play, culminating in an August 7-8 production of “The Jungle Book.”

Some of the 18-member TPP theater company will spend 11 weeks in Raton while others will have shorter stays as they work in one or two productions. Leahy’s excited. “It’s the largest season we’ve done and the most ambitious,” she says. “We had 150 submissions to join the summer company. We auditioned 70 in Chicago, then 30 more in Bloomington, Indiana.”

“Part of the attraction is the draw of Raton,” McCabe adds. “A summer out west was very romantic to some of the actors.”

“They’re an enthusiastic group,” Leahy says. “We finished casting the second week of April and then sent out contracts and scripts. We’ve been working on housing, sizes and costumes.” Each production has a different director and they’re in regular communication with the actors for their productions. The actors are learning their lines; in fact, their fellow Amtrak passengers may get more than they paid for if the actors start rehearsing during the overnight ride from Chicago.

Each company member is a theater professional with a long list of credits, and each is paid a professional wage. Ticket sales this summer are expected to cover only about 20% of the season's costs, with the region's generous theater fans and foundations making contributions to cover the rest.

McCabe and Leahy have been preparing their new company members for spending a summer in Raton. "They're mostly flatlanders," McCabe says. "We've been talking to them about the altitude, how they'll have to take it easy during a transition time. It'll affect their breathing and singing and delivery of lines. We've told them that they'll probably need to use a lot of lotion and chapstick."

Most of the company will live in second-floor apartments along Historic First Street, a few steps from the depot. "We've given them the hours for Enchanted Grounds," McCabe says, knowing the actors will hit the popular downtown espresso bar both early and late.

McCabe and Leahy were joined in last year's company by actors Tamara Todres and Blake White, both of whom return this year. Todres will be on stage for every production. White will act in "Midsummer Night's Dream" and direct McCabe and Leahy in "Boeing Boeing."

First-timers in Raton include actors Bussy Gower, Darren Hill, and Cassie Thompson. Like Todres, they'll appear in every production. Stage manager Emily Sjoerdsma will also spend the entire summer in Raton, as will local crewmember Kate Little.

Other company members include "Into the Woods" musical director Nathan Beary Blustein and that production's featured Witch, Eileen Jennings. Daniel Lenzian will direct "Midsummer Night's Dream." Actors Mike Danovich, Nicholas Pappas, Stephen Peebles and Jim Stark join the others in one or two casts each. Tony Penna and Colin Shay have been hard at work designing sets and lighting.

Two Pigs Productions has extensive notes and photos available at its own website and, especially, its Facebook page. Included are cast photos and biographies, production notes and posters for each of this summer's Shuler Theater plays.

Schedules, information, and tickets are available at the Shuler Theater, 131 N. 2nd St., (575) 445-4746. Tickets are \$20 for adults, \$15 seniors, \$5 children with discounts for five or more.

Greeting the troupe of actors as they step off the westbound Southwest Chief at Raton Depot Tuesday morning—that's free.