

Long-term commitment: Artistic growth, fiscal stability for Theatre

New director of Cheyenne Little Theatre Players has experience on, behind stage

Report: Karen Cotton

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Exit Harry Woods, stage left, the former director of the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players, retiring after three years of service.

Enter stage right, Dr. Randall "Randy" L. Bernhard, the new CLTP director as of July 1. As Bernhard took a seat on a stool center stage in the Mary Godfrey Playhouse, he admitted he used to be quite a ham and wouldn't mind giving it a try during his time as director.

"I may act in something here if the right thing comes along," he said. "I was the King in 'The King and I' and I was Lazar Wolf in 'Fiddler on the Roof.'"

Bernhard comes from Los Angeles, but his last job was in Oklahoma City, Okla., where he worked as the managing director of the Arts Council of Oklahoma City.

He talked with the Wyoming Tribune Eagle about his past, his hopes and vision for the Little Theatre Players in the coming years as well as why he chose Wyoming.

Why work in Cheyenne?

"I wanted to move West because it is close to where I went to school," Bernhard said. "I like the climate, and I know this sounds weird, I've even heard horror stories about your wind and cold. But after living in Louisiana and Oklahoma, this is a relief from the heat.

"Plus people here are really open, friendly and gracious."

Bernhard said he was looking for small town living.

"It's easier to get around," he said. "In Oklahoma City, you drive around so much, especially with the gas prices."

He added that in Cheyenne there's a lot of support for arts groups like the CLTP.

"When I mention I'm working for the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players in the community, I always get a positive response about the organization," he said.

Bernhard is definitely no stranger to the theater. He has a theater doctorate from Brigham Young University and several other credentials under his belt.

He also comes to the CLTP with an extensive marketing and banking background.

See Director, page E4

His vision

"I want to help enhance the fiscal security of the organization," Bernhard said. "I also want to help improve the operational procedures, so there's more organization."

One of his other goals is to get a broader circle of volunteers involved, so more of the community is involved in the theater.

But he added that there already is diversity.

"There were volunteers working hard at the Melodrama and they were from all cross sections of life," Bernhard said of the Old Fashioned Melodrama. "There was a guy who

was our Master of Ceremonies for the night and he was a police officer. Someone was waiting tables and they were from an electric company.

"That's what I like to see. That's what attracts me to the community theater."

He desires to bring that diversity to the theater's audience.

"I want to diversify the audience, so we have more longstanding, loyal patrons, as well as new and younger patrons," Bernhard said.

He has hopes of expanding the CLTP's educational outreach beyond the Cheyenne Little Theater Academy.

"Educational programs are a great way to get young parents involved because there are more ways to involve young children," he said.

He recently attended the academy's final summer performance and said the kids did pantomimes, monologues and short scenes.

"It was fun to see them perform. I liked that," he said.

He added that he likes the Reader's Theater series that Woods incorporated into the season.

"It's a way to explore new work," he said. "There are also ways to use reader's theater as an outreach to the community."

Additional programming might include showcasing scripts by high school students and possibly story slams.

Story slams are where people compete by telling stories based on a theme that are judged.

"Another way to possibly diversify the audience would be to offer contemporary, experimental shows as part of our programming," Bernhard said.

Initially to test the waters, the theater would provide a bonus show beyond the regular season.

"We don't know what the audience for that would be, and we don't want to offend our loyal subscribers," he said.

For any new programming Bernhard needs to pass suggestions through a programming committee and the full board.

He added that he also wants to make sure that there's enough meaty parts for actors to get their hands on that also make audiences happy.

"It's a fine balancing act, though, you want to keep your loyal audience happy," he said.

"You want to diversify your audience and bring new people in, at the same time.

"Volunteer actors want to do more interesting theater pieces, they like new and challenging roles of things they haven't done before."

He pointed to some old stand bys.

"While 'Sound of Music' and 'Annie' are lovely shows, volunteer actors get bored of those and you also want to keep them happy," Bernhard said.

Another challenge is to look at the theater commercially.

He has to find a balance between shows that are great commercially as well as shows that are great artistically but may not be as well-known, making tickets harder to sell.

"You have to have a balance when planning a season, but the season that I have right now I inherited," he said.

In the past, the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players relied heavily on ticket sales.

"With it being a non-profit organization, I have a desire to move it into a fundraising position," Bernhard said. "Right now we're scraping by fine, but I'd like us to become more solid financially."

A new fund development committee was started right before Bernhard got to the theatre, but he was able to sit in on the first meeting.

The committee was motivated by the Atlas Renovation project.

Bernhard said ticket sales cover 50 percent of the overall operation.

"The other 50 percent we get from other areas; businesses, individual contributions, sponsorships, grants, state and public funds that are available and we earn income from concession sales," he said. "Sometimes there's a misconception among the general public that a theater can cover expenses through ticket sales."

For the future

"We hope to be redesigning the theater's Web site, so people can buy tickets online," Bernhard said.

The Web site will have a call to action where volunteers can sign up and people can register their children for the theater academy.

"We also want to include a media section that will include articles, streaming video and photography archives of past productions," he said.

He added that the theater is also in the planning stages of creating a large scale annual fundraising event that would support the theater.

The historic Atlas Theatre

"There was a study done by the renovation board, a theater consulting firm that specializes in renovation for historic theaters, and I'm committed to that study," Bernhard said. "But, the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players has to be in good shape fiscally and operationally before we take on a large-scale capital campaign."

Bernhard was quick to add, "Not that we're going under."

"This organization has been around for 78 years, and we make ends meet," he said.

"But I want to enhance our fiscal base and position, so that we're prepared to take on a large project like that."

Once the Atlas is renovated, it can be used for a variety of purposes, including local arts events and touring productions.

Bernhard added that with a theater like the Atlas, he'll want as few dark days as possible to maximize its use.

How long will he stay?

"For a while, certainly until the job gets done," Bernhard said. "That's including the renovation of the Atlas, and that's going to take some time."

"I'm committed for the long-term," he said. "My wife and I already really enjoy Cheyenne."



Dr. Randall L. Bernhard poses for a portrait within the audience section of the Cheyenne Little Theatre Players. Bernhard is the new managing director of the playhouse. Brandon Quester/staff