



March 2016

Newsletter of the
Commonweal Theatre's
Million Dollar Club

Celebrating Hal Cropp's 25th Season

In 1992, the presidential race was between George Bush and Bill Clinton. Johnny Carson hosted his last telecast of *The Tonight Show*. Compact discs outsold cassette tapes for the first time, and *The Silence of the Lambs* swept the five major Academy Awards. And in Lanesboro, MN, the Commonweal Theatre Company was producing its fourth season. All three of its shows that year—*Little Shop of Horrors*, *Talley's Folly* and *Macbeth*—would feature a certain actor working a summer contract between semesters as an M.F.A. student at the National Theatre Conservatory. Fast-forward 24 years and 80 more productions as an actor, director and playwright and you have the remarkable career of Hal Cropp at the Commonweal Theatre.

"That first summer holds so many memories," Hal recalls. "Running on the trail and my first encounter with a bald eagle, hamburger soup after fall student matinees of *Macbeth*, walking the Buffalo Bill Days parade route, patrons stopping me time and again at the White Front Café over pie and coffee to talk about what they'd just seen."

From the early years of the Commonweal, Hal was center stage for building the identity of the company as it exists today—a distinct artist/administrator model that allowed a fledgling professional theatre company to take root in a rural town of less than 800



people and, in the process, become a cultural and economic engine for the town. Besides the vast array of characters he has played on stage, Hal has served as either the Artistic or Executive Director since 1994; the year the Commonweal reorganized as an artists' collective and formally became its own independent nonprofit organization.

In that time, the Commonweal has grown from a yearly audience of 6,500 to more than 21,000, performing in a modern, \$3.5 million facility, adding approximately \$3 million annually into the southeast Minnesota economy.

Hal's work has also embodied Commonweal's commitment to community

[continued overleaf: « Hal's 25th »]

The Rez

During the season, the Commonweal Theatre hires many artists as seasonal employees, freelance designers and apprentices—some of whom come from distant parts of the country. This year's apprentice class alone comes from Florida, Mississippi, Utah, Iowa, and Georgia. So where do these people live while they're working in Lanesboro?

Just a few blocks away from the Commonweal Theatre is the Artists' Residence, built and owned by the company since 1999. Whether staying for several weeks or several months, "The Rez" gives Commonweal's visiting artists a place to call home while they're in



A residence dining room & kitchen.

Lanesboro. The building is divided into two identical sides, each with a common living room, kitchen and laundry facilities. The main floor also features a rehearsal/storage/classroom space in

[continued overleaf: « The Rez »]

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Ron Deike (pen name **Rayson Lorrey**) and **Wei-Lin Jung**



Home: Rochester, MN

Occupations:

Rayson—Writer.

Wei-Lin—Physician with Mayo Health System.

What was the first play you ever saw at the Commonwealth?

Both—*A Doll's House* (2002).

What is your favorite Commonwealth production?

Rayson—*Arcadia* (2014), the richest and most rewarding play I've ever seen.

Wei-Lin—*How I Learned to Drive* (2002) showcased the company's ability and willingness to take risks.

Why do you continue to support the Commonwealth?

Both—We've attended hundreds of plays and the Commonwealth is our favorite venue. Professionalism extends to every production. The opportunity to chat with company members provides an intimacy we've seen nowhere else.

What is your dream for the Commonwealth?

Both—A broadened artistic vision with less emphasis on Ibsen. Added productions, perhaps with shorter runs, would allow the company to stretch its talented legs.

HAL'S 25TH

[continued from front

service. In twenty-five years, he has served on the Lanesboro City Council, the Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, and the Economic Development Authority. He has been a leader in the statewide arts scene, serving on the Board of Directors for the Southeastern Minnesota Arts Council, Minnesota Citizens for the Arts and the Minnesota Theatre Alliance.

What is it that keeps him coming back, year after year? Hal says, "The dream of every actor is to know that your work is having an impact on how people view the world. Even better, is

the idea that I can talk to our audience on the street, in a restaurant, or in the park without distance or pretension. This has been, and will continue to be, a reward beyond measure."



Hal Cropp in *Outside Mullingar*, appearing with Miriam Monasch.

THE REZ [continued from front

the middle, accessible from both sides. Up on the second floor are 5 single-sized bedrooms, 2 double-sized bedrooms and two full bathrooms. This housing (including all utilities) is provided as a standard part of an artist's contract with the Commonwealth.

Being able to live independently while working as a travelling freelancer is an attractive aspect of a Commonwealth job offer. Ben Gorman, Commonwealth Theatre's Graphic Designer, currently lives in "The Rez," as he did when first coming to work for the theatre back in 2001.

"Many small theatre companies don't have the resources to house actors, and are thereby limited to hiring locally," Ben says. "In 2001, my home was in Arizona and it would have been impos-

sible for me to take the job Commonwealth offered if it hadn't been for the Rez. The building was only about two years old at the time and I remember being very impressed that such a comparatively small company (as it certainly was then) could afford to provide such high quality



View in a typical single room.

housing for their visiting artists."

One of Commonwealth Theatre's first and most important principles is to offer artists a chance to make a living from their art—part of that comes from trying to provide a decent paycheck, and part comes from providing a comfortable place to rest their heads at the end of a long day. Next time you're at the theatre, ask a Commonwealth artist about their time in "The Rez"—you know how we love to tell good stories!



One of the residence living rooms.

GUEST TICKETS

Remember: The adult ticket price at the Commonwealth Theatre is \$35, but guests of MDC members only pay \$25. You can also get complimentary ticket vouchers to give to friends, family and neighbors whom you think will enjoy the great work at the Commonwealth just as much as you do! For more information, contact David Hennessey, 507-467-2905 ext 205 or david@commonwealththeatre.org.



Apprentice Capstone: Scotland Road

Have you taken your trip up *Scotland Road* yet? For one more weekend, the 2015-16 **Commonweal Apprentice Company** is thrilled to present their capstone production, *Scotland Road* by Jeffrey Hatcher. Set in 1995, this riveting mystery centers around the investigation of a young woman who claims she was a passenger on *Titanic*—83 years after the doomed ship sank to the bottom of the ocean. The quest for the truth, however, becomes clouded by personal secrets, hidden agendas, and the unsettling possibility that in some terrifying and amazing way, the young woman might actually be who she claims to be.

After nearly a year spent learning new skills as artist-administrators, each Apprentice Company gets a chance to put their knowledge to the test by fully producing their own project on the Commonweal stage. In addition to their roles on stage and behind the scenes, the apprentices are responsible for everything from choosing the script to managing the budget to designing all of the production elements, including set,



The 2015-16 Apprentice Company (l-r): Elizabeth Dunn, David Wasserman, Abbie Cathcart, Ashley Willingham, Kami Spaulding.

costumes, props and sound.

Resident ensemble member Scott Dixon directs the play, with technical apprentice Ashley Willingham as the stage manager. “It’s a trip down the rabbit hole for audience,” says Dixon. The harder that characters try to solve

the puzzle of this mystery woman, the more they have to confront the possibility that ‘reality’ is not as solid as we think it to be.”

The cast will consist of acting apprentices David Wasserman as John, Kami Spaulding as Dr. Halbrech, Abbie Cathcart as The Woman, and Elizabeth Dunn as Frances Kittle.

Scotland Road will play for three weekends, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights at 7:30PM and Sunday afternoons at 1:30PM from March 17th through April 3rd.

Tickets are complimentary for all MDC members and guest tickets are only \$15. Call the Commonweal Theatre Box Office at 800-657-7025 or email tickets@commonwealtheatre.org to make your reservation today.

Jars Full of Stories



The wall of mason jars on the lobby wall.

As you’ve entered the Commonweal Theatre before a performance, have you ever noticed the collection of mason jars arranged on the wall of our lobby?

Each jar represents a patron or family who gave generously to the construction of Commonweal Theatre back in 2007. Instead of brass plaques on the wall, Karl Unnasch—the local artist who designed the lobby—was inspired to create a Donor Pantry of mason jars, inside of which some of our Capital Campaign donors could put some knickknack or memento that meant something special to them.

For example, Bill and Barbara Colclough placed bicycles and a pail in their jar. Passionate cyclists, Bill and Barbara have often made a weekend of biking around Lanesboro, attending a play, biking the next day, and then seeing another play! Charles and Gloria Ruen, on the other hand, have souvenir antique glass from Lanesboro and a little cup (circa 1904). These antiques evoked Lanesboro’s history for Charles, his late wife Gloria, and their extended family. Bill Kelley’s jar has an aluminum stamp from an amusement park in

Bridgeport, Connecticut, a pair of Yale cuff links, a Penny from General Electric and poems from his wife, Helen. Bob and Marilyn Larson wanted to pay homage to the heritage of their grandchildren, whose father is from Zimbabwe, and so they placed an African dancer figurine in their jar. Gene and Renee Bergstrom have a tripod and an Amish picture in their jar, which evokes the life of Bluff Country through her small photo business. David and Linda Hennessey have a miniature Scrabble board with the words “theatre” and “language,” as well as two full-size tiles with the Hennesseys’ initials in their jar.

On first glance, the Commonweal’s donor jars are a beautiful addition to the artistic landscape of our lobby. In reality, though, they are so much more. The next time you visit the theatre, take a look through our pantry. Find your own jar, or let your imagination puzzle and tumble over the meaning behind the trinkets and memories others have saved. There really are great stories all around us!



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Let Us Wine and Dine You!

We thank our MDC members after every performance, and now we want to show you our thanks.

Please mark your calendars to be our guest at a special **MDC Cocktail Party** on these select dates:

The League of Youth . . . Friday, June 3

Souvenir. Friday, August 12

The Three Musketeers
. Friday, September 23

Pride's Crossing . . . Friday, October 28

A Christmas Carol..Friday, December 2

The Commonweal provides complimentary beer, wine, and appetizers plus the opportunity to socialize with company members and fellow MDC members before these performances.

Space is limited—please reserve early! RSVP to **Megan Pence**: 507-467-2905 ext. 212 or events@commonwealtheatre.org

Volunteer at the Commonweal!

Would you like to know the very, very best way to get to know the artists at the Commonweal and how we do what we do every day? Then you might think about giving some volunteer time. We are so grateful for the more than 1,500 hours of volunteer service we receive every year from Million Dollar Club members, Season Pass holders, and local community members who lend their time and their talents to everything from helping with costume repair to handing out programs for shows to working in the administrative offices.

Do you have a couple of hours to spend with us, and get the real inside look at the Commonweal? Contact **Stela Burdt** at 507-467-2905 ext. 206 or stela@commonwealtheatre.org to find out how you can help!

Automatic Donations

Are you trying to do away with your checkbook? Do you pay all your bills on-line? Do you wish your annual donation to the Commonweal were a monthly donation instead? We can help! Commonweal can do an automatic debit from your checking account—annually, quarterly, or monthly—to process your donation without any additional effort on your part. For more information, contact **David Hennessey**:
507-467-2905 x205
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In Common is a publication of the Commonweal Theatre Company

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