

Community is Lance Petersen's stage

by Jan O'Meara

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Lance Petersen is a man with strong, positive ideas about theater, ideas which he consistently and continually sets about proving.

Nearly a decade ago he began Pier One Theatre in Homer, specifically to test two of his theories: namely, that community theater can be both excellent and self-supporting. For the next four summers the group of local performers he attracted performed everything from Moliere to Miller, winning support and approval from residents and summer visitors.

Now he is in the process of putting another theory into practice, as he expands the definition of community to include the whole west side of the Kenai Peninsula. For the second year in a row, he has coordinated a full season of drama, dance, and music, involving theater and dance groups from Kenai, Soldotna and Homer.

Mr. Petersen says he was not always interested in theater. As a young man in Kenai, he thought he'd like to be an engineer, so after graduation from high school he entered an automotive engineering college in the Lower 48. He soon discovered that he did not really want to be an engineer after all, and decided to pursue a teaching career. After attending a teachers' college for awhile, he changed his mind again.

"I've gone through a long succession of wondering what I was going to be when I grow up, and at various times in my life, from eight years up, I've had all kinds of ideas. I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up"

Ultimately, he returned to Alaska and attended Alaska Methodist University (now Alaska Pacific University) in Anchorage, graduating with a degree in speech and drama.

It was in Anchorage that Mr. Petersen first became involved with community theater, as a backstage technician and as an actor – experiences which gave him needed background for his future role as a director.

He continued working with community theater when he moved to Kenai, but it was not until he moved to Homer with his wife Barbara that Mr. Petersen decided to try his hand at directing.

“My interest comes from all kinds of sources, but mainly from the idea that community support and community artists can result in a very high quality theatrical experience,” he says.

This is what he set out to prove when he began Pier One Theatre productions in 1973. The venture began when he and a friend each put up \$50 for plywood to build a set. After four successful seasons, supported entirely by volunteer effort and ticket sales, Mr. Petersen decided it was time for Pier One to do something else.

“It required the efforts of quite a few people from noon to midnight all summer long, seven days a week, with rare days off. It seemed to me that we’d done what we set out to do. We’d proved that the idea would work, and in order to make it work better on a full time basis we needed to quit doing what we were doing; and look at it in a different light.”

Another reason the group ceased its summer productions was loss of their performing space, a problem that continues to plague them today and one which they would like to see solved by construction of a performing arts center in Homer, Mr. Petersen said.

Now, performers have to compete with recreational and school use of the school gymnasiums. Within the next few years they will have the use of the auditorium planned for the new Homer high school, but Mr. Petersen believes that will only be a stop-gap space for community performers.

“Initially the high school won’t have a drama program, but inside of a few years if there is a theater there will be a teacher at the high school who will develop a drama program and there will be students doing plays there, and soon that theater will be used for its primary use which is as a school educational facility for the students at the high school, which is appropriate. I think there needs to be a city facility, not connected with the educational program at the public school.”

But wherever the performance occurs – whether in a gymnasium or plush, acoustically engineered auditorium between the audience and the performers.

Successful theater depends on two types of energy: that generated by the performers and that brought by the audience. Either both are involved or nothing happens, Mr. Petersen says.

“Performing arts is a synergistic thing. It’s a collaborative artistic effort. Most artists work best in solitude; the artistic effort is something that happens between the painter and the canvas. In theater, it’s a collective creative process; it depends very much on the energy of a lot of different efforts and the result is a blossom of energy and creativity that is more than just the adding up of everybody’s energy. The audience affects the performers and it is unique every time it happens, even with the same play. Somehow, each night the audience changes the performance.”

It is this faculty which attracts Mr. Petersen. “The theater is like a living sculpture that’s forever changing form and shape a little bit. That’s a fascinating thing to be involved with.”

Whatever the attraction of national professional theater, for Mr. Petersen the choice to live in Homer was simple. “I don’t look at Homer as a career step, I look at it as a place to be, to live.”

The decision has made a commuter out of him. Twice a week he drives back and forth to Soldotna, where he teaches English, speech, theater and literature at the Kenai Peninsula Community College.

Mr. Petersen believes many people in Homer share his attitude. He said he has found many performers here who have lots of training and experience – some of it paid – who do other things to make a living.

While these people are not paid for their efforts in local community theater productions, they are just as professional as those who are, Mr. Petersen said. The term “professional” means two different things, he said: excellence and performance for pay. The two meanings are often confused but they are not synonymous, he said. “Many high quality things are done by professionals who get paid for what they do, but paying people will not make them better, necessarily.”

Training and development will, however, and they can get that in community theater. “Part of what we’re about is developing and training people who have an interest, and perhaps no other experience in theater. They learn by doing.” Mr. Petersen said he keeps in mind a standard of

excellence which he tries to help performers reach by any way necessary. “We’re aiming at an energy and quality level that meets those standards.”

Whether it is a paid company or a volunteer group, it takes about 200 hours to bring a play through rehearsal and final production, Mr. Petersen said. A major difference between paid and non-paid performers is the amount of personal time that must be contributed. A paid company may work eight hours a day five days a week, where a volunteer group may only get four or five hours a week. “It’s pretty hard to get eight hours of rehearsal time when you start at 7 o’clock at night, after the kids are fed and the baby sitter has come and the floor is swept and the dishes are done.”

Another difference Mr. Petersen sees between paid and volunteer performers is that sometimes those who are paid have the opportunity to do more plays and so gain more experience. But that difference is diminishing as more and more plays are produced by Peninsula performers – a side benefit to Mr. Petersen’s attempt to broaden the base of local community theater. In tapping the talents of performers in Kenai, Soldotna and Homer and providing adequate performance possibilities for all of them, more plays are produced and more experience is gained by everybody/

Mr. Petersen said he believes theater on the Peninsula can be as good as anything that can be seen in the state.

Of course, by using an all volunteer cast and crew, costs are kept down so prices may be, too. Since another of his goals is to make theater more accessible to a bigger audience, Mr. Petersen said, “This year we’re trying to make it less expensive to go to the theater overall, to make it possible for families with lots of kids to take them all to see a play without it costing as much as a trip to Anchorage. That’s not happening in other places.”

In setting up a series of plays, Mr. Petersen said he considers several factors. First, he tries for a balance between comedies and serious plays. Then he looks for plays that can be produced locally and that are challenging enough to stretch the performers’ abilities. “I’m always looking at ways for us to do something that’s a little different from what we’ve done before. If we succeed at something, then we tackle something else. It’s an endless series of challenges.”

Mr. Petersen said he prefers plays that make some kind of statement about humanity. Ultimately, what the audience should get out of a play, he said, “is an understanding of what it’s like to be a human being, what it’s like to be a John Proctor (“The Crucible”) who would rather die by hanging than live a lie about something, or what it’s like to be Scrooge and have a transformation of attitude.”

What performers should get, he said, is “the accomplishment of producing the highest quality of art that we can help them produce, and the knowledge that through their own personal effort they made this thing happen.” Of course, Mr. Petersen said, “they also get applause, their friends and neighbors see them, and they have a great deal of fun, with all the hard work.”

Mr. Petersen believes the future of theater on the Peninsula is bright. He sums up his prediction in one word, more: more effort, more performances, more groups. “The more theater there is, the better it is, the better for everybody.”

It was his desire to promote theater, on the Peninsula and throughout the state, that caused Mr. Petersen to accept Gov. Hammond’s appointment to the Alaska State Council on the Arts last fall. “It seemed to me, after talking with the chairman and executive director of the council, that I could make some positive contribution.”