

Locals team up to do 'Mass Appeal'

Written by Janna Ross

Tuesday, 07 September 2010 00:00 - Last Updated Tuesday, 07 September 2010 13:10

People are given opportunities sometimes before they really realize the opportunity is in front of them.

The opportunity for Derby Dinner favorite J.R. Stuart to help his church, St. Marks United Church of Christ, recently happened in a way only Stuart would see.

The church is helping provide for over 100 people each week. The church is helping them when they are hungry and when they need clothing, things many local residents take for granted. Helping those less fortunate in the community, the church needed to raise funds for their Capital Campaign Fund.

According to Stuart, the church is mission oriented.

"The church is extremely mission-oriented, feeding and clothing 100 plus every week, building homes with Habitat for Humanity, local Repair Affair projects, promoting healthy drinking sources in far-away lands and giving hope, shelter, peace, good and grace locally, nationally and internationally. You know the things that Christ asks us to do," Stuart stated about the missions of his church and church family.

When Stuart learned of the Capital Campaign Fund at the church he had a brilliant idea to help kick off the campaign. How great would it be to combine his passion for the church he has come to love and his passion for theatre?

That is exactly what Stuart has done.

The Capital Campaign Fund will benefit from the production of Bill C. Davis' MASS APPEAL. The fundraiser will benefit the campaign with 100 percent of the proceeds going straight to the Capital Campaign Fund.

"An anonymous donor has paid all the royalties up front so that 100 percent of the proceeds can go to the Capital Campaign Fund," Stuart explained.

He continued, "It's an honor to be able to combine my two favorite things, theatre and St. Marks United Church of Christ, and I want to thank all who have made these performances possible."

Stuart and Aaron Johnson, a senior at Floyd Central High School, will be featured in the two-man production.

"I was enthralled by Aaron holding his own with college actors in the IUS Theatre's recent production of THE BOYS NEXT DOOR," Stuart explained about Johnson.

Johnson recalls speaking with Stuart after the production at Indiana University Southeast.

"J.R. saw my performance in the IUS show THE BOYS NEXT DOOR, and talked to me afterwards about auditioning. I got a hold of the script and instantly was intoxicated by this story," Johnson stated.

Johnson's excitement for the story was evident as he auditioned for the role of Mark Dolson, a young seminarian who attacks for salvation, as he was given the role on the spot.

Stuart portrays Father Farley, who accommodates to survive.

Stuart first found MASS APPEAL shortly after it premiered 30 years ago off-Broadway.

Stuart fell in love with the script and was determined to produce the play. He quickly found a friend, Michael Swinford, who loved the play as much as he did. The two then found a director, Louise Jones, who also loved the script. Luckily the trio found a production space perfect for the two man production. The problem happened to be the openings of the Gra-Light Alternative Theatre Co.

Determination ruled as scheduling conflicts tried to derail the plan of producing MASS APPEAL. Stuart was directing the play BENT at Ball State University's Studio Theatre, now the

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Strother, and Swinford was playing one of the leads. Due to the scheduling issues, they had to open MASS APPEAL just one week after the opening of BENT, and a mere four days after BENT closed.

"We barricaded ourselves in Louise's house, knuckled down and immersed ourselves into the world of Deacon Dolson and Father Farley. We ran scenes a thousand times until we had nailed each one. We opened and got beautiful notices and we both consider that run one of the highlights of our performing lives," Stuart fondly recalled.

Stuart explains the story of MASS APPEAL with the matched excitement of Johnson.

"This is a beautiful two man play, as humorous as it is poignant, concerns the clash of ideology and personality between an older entrenched priest, Farther Farley, who accommodates to survive, and a young scorching seminarian, Mark Dolson, who attacks to force salvation," Stuart explained. "Each in his own way uses his relationship to the congregation to resolve personal scars. As each tries to force each other to be a good priest, they learn, in unexpected ways, the nature of courage, friendship and the infinite varieties of love."

MASS APPEAL happens within the Catholic Church, but according to Stuart, "could happen in a Baptist Church. A Presbyterian Church. A Mosque. A business office. A street corner... It's about mentorship, ideals, wounds and healing them. It's about submission, absolution, courage. It's about two flawed human beings who together, learn how to live. It is as funny as it is moving and profound."

Johnson and Stuart have an admiration for each other that is evident when talking with each actor.

"Working with such a talented and experienced actor such as J.R. has been terrific. This play deals with so many elements, it has been so much fun to channel these characters and watch them come to life," Johnson stated when asked how it was to be working with Stuart.

"Aaron is a joy, although still a high school student he is an absolute consummate professional and is wildly talented and has an absolute affinity for the role and is truly an old soul and man of the theatre," Stuart stated when asked the same question about Johnson.

Johnson has been very busy as he has been preparing for the production of MASS APPEAL. Johnson, who began attending Floyd Central as a junior, has the commute from Salem to Floyds Knobs daily for school, plus he opened ARSENIC AND OLD LACE on September 2, plus rehearsals for MASS APPEAL.

Of course, Johnson, is just grateful for the opportunity.

"The commute isn't as bad as it seems, and is absolutely worth it to be involved in such a wonderful theatre program," Johnson stated. "This past year I received the blessing to be President of FC Theatre for the 2010-2011 school year."

Johnson feels blessed to be working with Stuart and the wonderful show of MASS APPEAL. After graduation from Floyd Central he will pursue a BFA in Acting.

Although Johnson is just a senior in high school, he has taken advantage of the opportunities given to him in the pursuit of his dreams.

During the past year, he worked on his first independent film NO MORE BLOOD, where he portrayed Jackie.

Johnson has also been involved in many areas of theatre including writing, directing and of course, performance.

Some of Johnson's favorite roles include: ARSENIC AND OLD LACE (Dr. Einstein), A PERFECT REFLECTION (Male), THE CRUCIBLE (Rev. Hale), THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK (Peter Van Daan), THE WIZARD OF OZ (Scarecrow), THE BOYS NEXT DOOR, ALMOST

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MAINE, OLIVER!, SEUSSICAL, JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR, GODSPELL, OF MICE AND MEN and A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

MASS APPEAL is Stuart's second production of the summer as he has spent the last few months preparing for THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK, where he portrayed Mark Twain. The production was adapted by Stuart from writings of the beloved American author Mark Twain with performances in Nashville, North Vernon and a fundraising stint in Charlestown for a local boy scout troop.

Stuart is thrilled to be sharing the stage in MASS APPEAL with the "generously talented" Aaron Johnson, as Stuart described Johnson.

Stuart is a resident actor at Derby Dinner Playhouse, where he arrived in 1990 and has become a Derby favorite. He is a veteran of over 200 productions and besides acting also loves other aspects of the theatre including directing, adapting and writing. Stuart is honored to be revisiting MASS APPEAL, as he first performed the role 24 years ago at the Gra-Light Alternative Co.

Some of Stuart's favorite roles include: Tevye in FIDDLER, Pseudolus and Senex in FORUM, Twain in THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK, President Truman in GIVE 'EM HELL HARRY!, Weller in THE GIN GAME, Sancho in MAN OF LA MANCHA, Philip in THE LION IN WINTER, Estragon in WAITING FOR GODOT, Zangler in CRAZY FOR YOU, the old Soul, et. al. in PEACE IN THE VALLEY and PEACE LIKE A RIVER and Willie in THE SUNSHINE BOYS. Stuart also co-authored PEACE LIKE A RIVER.

The Capital Campaign Fund, which MASS APPEAL proceeds will benefit, at St. Marks United Church of Christ will provide geo-thermal HVAC, expansion to the church's Clothes Closet and kitchen facilities.

Johnson and Stuart will perform only 10 performances of MASS APPEAL. The production is directed by Stuart and produced by the St. Marks Evangelism Committee.

Opening night of MASS APPEAL will be tomorrow, September 9 at 8 p.m. Additional performances will be held Friday through Sunday, September 10-12 and Thursday through Sunday, September 16-19 at 8 p.m. Matinee performances of MASS APPEAL will be held on Sundays, September 12 and 19 at 2 p.m.

Performances will be held at the St. Marks United Church of Christ Chapel located at 222 Spring Street in New Albany.

MASS APPEAL is suitable for viewers 13 years old and older.

The general seating admission will be \$10. Reservations are required. Please call 502-509-1114 specifying date, time and number of tickets. Tickets will then be pulled and your reservation confirmed. Tickets will be on a honor system, therefore you may call now and reserve your tickets and pay for the tickets at the door. If you cannot make the show when your reservations are made, you must still pay for the tickets due to the fundraising performances.

These performances of MASS APPEAL are dedicated to the memory of Clay Wrege.