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10 days, 21 plays, more than 100 performances: Stoneleaf Theater Festival

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ASHEVILLE — Comedies, musicals, dramas and children's plays. They're all in the spotlight at the second annual Stoneleaf, A Festival of North Carolina Theatre, opening Friday in Asheville.

Over a 10-day stretch, 21 different productions are coming out to play — both local groups and ensembles from across North Carolina. It's something like Bebe Chere, Asheville's big music festival, only with actors and directors and stagehands, instead of rock bands and food vendors.

"What a difference a year makes," said Terry Milner, director of the North Carolina Theatre Conference, which organizes Stoneleaf. "Having been through it once and learning a lot of lessons, we are way ahead. Everything has come together."

Multimedia

- Actors Lynn Llewelyn (pink dress), Jake Speck (cowboy hat), and Neela Munoz (blue dress) rehearse a scene for the Flat Rock Production of 'The Melville Boys.' (1,560 KB)
- Actors Lynn Llewelyn (pink dress), Chris Blisset (plaid shirt), and Jake Speck (cowboy hat) rehearse a scene for the Flat Rock Playhouse production of 'The Melville Boys.' (1,549 KB)
- Scenes from the play, 'War Bonds: The Songs and Letters of World War II,' produced by EbzB Productions. (1,345 KB)

What's different this year

The festival has scaled back some from its debut, when 26 theater groups took part at 10 locations. This year's festival has six venues — five in downtown Asheville, plus Flat Rock Playhouse in Flat Rock. "It's still a huge festival," Milner said.

"We wanted to make it a little less overwhelming," he added. "There's a diverse variety of programming without spreading the audience too thin." New to the festival are Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre, Temple Theater of Sanford and PlayMakers Repertory Company of Chapel Hill. Gone is Asheville's Highland Repertory Theater, which folded last year.

Theaters from near and far

"I think interest in Stoneleaf is spreading across the state," said Robin Farquhar, executive and artistic director of Flat Rock Playhouse. "Because we are so close (to Asheville) it is easy to work with the festival

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by producing our show ("The Melville Boys") in our space. And we are bringing over our YouTheatre production of 'Pinocchio."

"Every chance you have to expose more people to the theater we have in North Carolina, the better for everybody," he said.

Coming from the Raleigh area for a second year is EbzB Productions, a husband-wife company featuring David zum Brunnen and Serena Ehardt, doing their original show, "War Bonds: The Songs and Letters of World War II."

"Stoneleaf is a great theater for us," Ehardt said. "We are on the road so much (touring their shows) that we don't get to see our peers that often. This is a great opportunity for us all to get together. And there's the chance to do work we love in a beautiful town."

The impact

Last year's first Stoneleaf sold 6,000 tickets and had a budget of \$100,000. "We are trying to keep the budget the same this year," Milner said. The debut festival "did not lose money" and had a "quarter of a million dollar impact in Asheville and Buncombe County," he said.

Beyond the box office, Stoneleaf brings a buzz to theater, which needs all the attention it can generate, he said.

"I don't know of any cultural enterprise that is not in perilous straits, and theater is no exception," he said. "We are constantly challenged to reach audiences with limited marketing budgets. The experience of having your theater company showcased hundreds of miles from your home means a great deal to these artists."

The shows

For a detailed schedule, visit www.stoneleaftheatrefestival.com/2006/shows/index.shtml and click on which date you would like to attend. Here are brief descriptions of the plays to be presented:

- "War Bonds: The Songs and Letters of World War II," a collection of memories and music by EbzB Productions, Raleigh.
- "The Lonesome West," a dark comedy about two bickering Irish brothers and a priest who tries to stop their fighting, by Temple Theater of Sanford
- "I Am My Own Wife," the story of a German transvestite who lives under the reigns of the Kaiser, Hitler, the communists and finally a democracy, all while wearing a dress, by



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"War Bonds: The Songs and Letters of World War II" will be performed by EbzB Productions during the Stoneleaf theater festival. "War Bonds" runs Saturday through June 1 at the N.C. Stage Company space, next to the Rankin Avenue parking deck.

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Festival details

What: Stoneleaf, a Festival of North Carolina Theatre
When: Performances run Friday through June 4
Where: Venues include Diana Wortham Theatre at Pack Place; North Carolina Stage Company (next to the Rankin Avenue parking deck); BeBe Theatre, 20 Commerce St.; Asheville Community Theatre, 35 E. Walnut St.; Windows on the Park private dining room on Pack Square; and Flat Rock Playhouse, Flat Rock.
Performance schedules and ticket information: 257-4500
Tickets: Stoneleaf KIDS! productions \$9. Regular productions \$15-\$22.50. Tickets available at the Pack Place box office, online or by phone, 257-4500.
On the Net: www.stoneleaftheatrefestival.com

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PlayMakers Repertory Company of Chapel Hill.

- "Elephant Sighs," a comedy about a guy who joins a local men's club – before learning just what the group is all about, by The Broach Theatre of Greensboro and The Occasional Theatre of Asheville.
- "The Last Five Years," a musical comedy about the five-year life of a marriage, by the Asheville Arts Center.
- "The Melville Boys," a comedy about brothers whose fishing weekend takes an unexpected twist, by Flat Rock Playhouse. This is the only show not performed in Asheville, and will be done at Flat Rock Playhouse in Flat Rock.
- "(neat; a bar play)," a series of one-acts in a bar, by the Redundant Theatre Company Theatre of Asheville.
- "Bachelor Pad," a celebration of 1960s lounge music, by Asheville Community Theatre.
- "The Anatomy of a Melancholy," a look at the human condition, for adults, by the P.O'Connor Puppets of Asheville.
- "Stones in His Pockets," a revival of this comedy about a small Irish village disrupted by a Hollywood movie company, by North Carolina Stage Company of Asheville.
- "Lost Highway," about country music legend Hank Williams, by Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre of Mars Hill.
- "Miss Julie," the story of a lonely woman and her relationship with her stable hand, by Burning Coal Theatre Company of Raleigh. It was developed at last year's Stoneleaf, where it had two public readings.
- "Senator Sam," about the famous North Carolina U.S. Senator Sam Ervin Jr., and his battles against the communist witch hunts of the 1950s and the Watergate conspirators of the 1970s, by Blowing Rock Stage Company of Blowing Rock.
- "The Shooting Stage," a puzzle connecting two generations and sets of characters in a story of an obscenity trial, by the Raleigh Ensemble Players of Raleigh.
- "The Nightingale," adapted from the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, by Grey Seal Puppets of Charlotte.
- "Beauty and the Beast," a family production from the Taradiddle Players, The Professional Touring Company of Children's Theatre of Charlotte.
- "The Fever," a one-man piece about a rich American who must confront his involvement with dark forces in an unnamed poor country, performed by Tom Glynn.
- "Pinocchio," the story of the puppet who comes to life, by Flat Rock Playhouse YouTheatre.
- "Intimate E-Pistles," about how modern technology has changed courtship, by Off Tryon Theatre Company of Charlotte.
- Transactors Improv Comedy of Chapel Hill in a performance of emotional physical fun.

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