

Broke With the Wind under the big top



Members of the Rivertime Players do far more than rehearse and stage plays each year. The entire cast works tirelessly to produce sets, props, costumes, makeup, lights, sound, ticket sales, posters, candy boxes and popcorn sales. The poster above was designed and created by Mark Tubbs, who has been with the group since its inception.

How Now White Cow, or You Can Put Your Shoes in the Oven, But That Don't Make 'em Biscuits

Elicia Jo Spain was the only person to show up to the auditions. "Judy Daugherty approached me about doing the audition for the show. I remember going there not knowing what to expect since I had never acted in a play before. Well to my surprise I was the only participant, so needless to say, I was cast." The rest of the inexperienced cast consisted of David Taylor, who had made a quick and random trip to the municipal building and found himself hornsogged into the theater arts by Daugherty; and Dotty Hill and Mark Tubbs, who found out through Taylor "that they had been volunteered" as well. The first cast also included Clayton Quinn.

The fledgling group had only four weeks to prepare for their first performance, one that admittedly was held on a wing and a prayer. They never even had a dress rehearsal. They appeared onstage that first Saturday night in front of a standing-room-only crowd. It was the first time that they had rendered the play from the beginning to the end. "I'll never forget the look on his face when we finished that first show," said Tubbs, speaking of Bridges.

The next year Bridges again returned to Parsons to tackle *The Return of Aunt Susan*, a melodrama with a dry script and few jokes that would require more skills from his young troupe. In order to engage the audience, Bridges demanded very tight and precise stage movements to give the feel of old-style theater. He drilled his cast with technical motions that were difficult for even the most seasoned actors, but they rose to the occasion. Once again, the public response was remarkable and very rewarding.

In 2009, when Bridges made his annual trip to Parsons and the tent show, he came bearing a full-length, three-act play he had written himself, *Lead Petunias*, an homage to a popular southern movie. The production was so popular that a second night was added to the bill.

In 2010, the group returned to its roots and recreated their first effort, *How Now, White Cow* with added vaudeville acts. By this time, not only the community's interest was piqued, but people were beginning to travel many miles to be able to witness an old-time traveling tent repertoire company in action.

About this time, Bridges life also took a curious turn. Shortly after the birth of his daughter, he was offered the opportunity to move to Parsons from Nashville to serve as the director of the Digital Factory. Not only was it a wonderful opportunity, the move placed him squarely in the middle of the theater community that he had grown to love.

Bridges was toying with the idea of writing a play called *Driving Miss Crazy* until Daugherty approached him, suggesting that he script this year's scenario to correlate with the Civil War. Thus, *Broke with the Wind* was born.

The Rivertime Players have evolved into a tight community of thespians with the same core group that appeared onstage that first night in 2007. "That one audition has turned out to be a blessing, not only because we get to bring a little amusement to the folks who attend but mostly



Cast members Mark Tubbs, Shane Bridges and Dotty Hill rehearse for this year's tent show performance, *Broke With the Wind*. Bridges also wrote the script for the play, which is set in the Civil War era.



The stage has been set for this year's performances, slated for September 30, and October 2, 7 and 8.



A view from the stage of the tent show in 1952 gives a good look at a full house with an excited audience.

because all of the cast has formed special bonds that I believe will last forever. We are like one big family," says Spain.

The troupe has grown to include Adam Stanford, Alyssa Brittain, Jeff Stout, Bill White, Brett Jordan, Carol Shaw, Hunter Jordan, Jenni Turner, and George Pettigrew. "We definitely look forward to each year's performances," says Tubbs. "We get a little tired after eight weeks of preparation, but it is a blast. When it is over, we wonder what to do next." In addition to rehearsals three or four days a week, cast members are also responsible for set design and construction, costumes, props, makeup, lights, sound, ticket sales, posters, candy boxes and popcorn sales to make each year's events a success. Most are shameless about tapping the talents of their friends and relatives in their quest to make each performance bigger and better. The players speak gratefully of Stanford's mother and the Rivertime Player's pianist, Patricia Stanford, who, in 2008 appeared 'like

a guardian angel' in their time of need. "Patricia is a vital part of what we do every year," Bridges said. Bridges is also quick to note the tremendous contributions made each year by Wayne Lyles and the Parsons Public Works Department. "We could not do this without them."

The Rivertime Players have ushered in a new era for their company with the certification of their group as a 501(c)(3) entity. This status makes them eligible for grants and tax-deductible donations, which they hope will enable them to grow exponentially. With one of the last tent shows in the United States, the opportunity to build on what has been given to the city of Parsons is one that many look forward to. All agree, however, that it is the support of the community that makes their efforts worthwhile. "It is amazing when you stop to think that about 20% of the people of Parsons come to see the show," Bridges notes. "We sure try to give them their money's worth," adds Tubbs.

By Pam McGaha
pmcgaha@netease.net

Members of Parsons' own traveling tent repertoire company, the Rivertime Players, are gearing up for a series of performances of *Broke with the Wind* under the big top that will begin next weekend with a Friday evening show and Sunday matinee, followed by another two performances the following Friday and Saturday nights.

The tent show probably is the nearest thing we have to genuine American folk theater. For over 100 years, traveling tent shows represented an integral chapter of American theater history. In small towns, like Parsons, that could not support a full-time playhouse, the shows would come to the people, lock, stock and barrel.

Those who have lived in the area long enough can remember the excitement felt by the community when the old tent shows rolled into town. The Memphis-based Bisbee's Comedians entertained thousands as they traveled through Tennessee and Kentucky from the late '20's until the late '60's, with Parsons being the second stop on their tour. Each evening the show began with a 30 minute concert by the orchestra, followed by a three or four act comedy or comedy drama with vaudeville specialties between the acts. "Tent show week" brought a flurry of activity and exhilaration.

The beginnings of the Parsons tent show can be traced to its original founder, Richard Henderson, who formed the Henderson Stock Company in 1898. Henderson formed the company with the intention of temporarily employing himself and his out-of-work actor friends, and he toured his company until his retirement in

1934.

Harold Rosier, a featured actor in the show, managed the company after Henderson's retirement. He later purchased the company from Henderson's widow in 1937 and changed the name to the Rosier Players.

In 1997, Rosier's widow donated the tent show to Dr. Dawn Larsen and the Hard Corn Players of Gallatin, Tenn. The Hard Corn Players were 10 to 15 young actors hired to function as an old time tent company and

museum during the Parsons Peavine Heritage Festival, this year the old-time Toby Tent Show will present *Broke With the Wind*, a farce with melodramatic twists set in a small southern town during the post-Civil War reconstruction years. The play focuses on Scarlett O'Hara, seventeen years after the war, trying to keep her head above water as rising taxes threaten her beloved Tara. The fun begins when Scarlett receives a letter announcing Ashley Wilkes' im-

Broke with the Wind

Performances are

- Friday, September 30 at 8 p.m.
- Sunday matinee, October 2 at 2:30 p.m.
- Friday, October 7 at 8 p.m.
- Saturday, October 8 at 8 p.m.

For more information visit the Parsons Peavine website at <http://parsonspeavinefestival.com>

tour throughout the Southeast in the summers. The actors functioned as a troupe; driving the trucks, cooking meals, selling tickets, and sleeping in smaller tents surrounding the big tent in order to protect it from the weather.

In November 2006 the show was donated to the Parsons Arts Council. With this gift of a 45' x 90' tent, three 1942 stake trucks, 300-400 original scripts, costumes, painted drops (some 100 years old), 300 blue folding chairs, and other necessities of the road, the Rivertime Players were born.

With a nod to the commemoration of the Civil War Sesquicentennial and the "Civil War Heritage Divided Loyalties Exhibit" on display at the Parsons

museum during the Parsons Peavine Heritage Festival, this year the old-time Toby Tent Show will present *Broke With the Wind*, a farce with melodramatic twists set in a small southern town during the post-Civil War reconstruction years. The play focuses on Scarlett O'Hara, seventeen years after the war, trying to keep her head above water as rising taxes threaten her beloved Tara. The fun begins when Scarlett receives a letter announcing Ashley Wilkes' im-

minent arrival, while at the same time, unbeknownst to her, Rbett Butler is making his own way back to the plantation. The play was written by Shane Bridges, who is a long-time member of the Toby troupe. His involvement with the show goes back to 1997, when he was working with Dr. Larsen and the Hard Corn Players.

Bridges, a professional actor from Nashville, came to Parsons to direct the first tent show production in 2007. Although he had initially planned to execute a performance of *The Return of Aunt Susan*, but after taking one look at what he euphemistically calls the "green" troupe, he quickly decided to downgrade his hopes to a performance of the vaudevillian