

'There's a lot of talent in this valley'

The Boston Globe

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk, Globe Correspondent | August 1, 2007

WAITSFIELD, Vt. -- This small community of about 1,700 has one of the state's liveliest visual, cultural, and performing arts scenes and, at least unofficially, its highest concentration of artists.

"Not a lot of people watch television here, and it's a much more vibrant community because of that," says Jennifer Howard, a local resident and chairwoman of The Valley Players, a community theater group. "People tend to get out more and get involved."

Howard and others also attribute this vibrancy to the New Yorkers and other New Englanders who have moved to the area and brought art or art appreciation with them, and to the openness of the existing community.

Waitsfield is home to a professional theater group, a community theater group, a choral group, a facility that hosts summer music and theater camps for children, numerous venues that showcase high-quality theater events and musical performances throughout the year, and many galleries that exhibit the works of dozens of local artists.

The Valley Players performs several high-caliber theater events each year in a historic building on Main Street that was a church when it was built in the 1800s.

"We firmly believe in making the performing arts available to everyone by keeping our prices down and encouraging people to get up on stage," says Howard. "There's a lot of talent in this valley and people who love to get on stage."

The community theater group usually puts on three to five big productions a year, shows such as the recent musical "Side by Side by Sondheim" and the comedy "The Cemetery Club."

This month, the group holds three play readings as part of the Vermont Festival of the Arts. The first, Aug. 9, is a staged reading of the very funny whodunit, "The Real Inspector Hound" by Tom Stoppard.

The readings on Aug. 16 and 23 "are open to anyone who walks through the door," says Howard.

Each summer, the Skinner Barn Theatre Company produces a Broadway cabaret series, a big musical, and several public dances at The Skinner Barn, a restored 1891 post-and-beam dairy barn.

The company's founder, Peter Boynton, moved to Waitsfield in 2000 from New York, where he was a Broadway actor and a soap star on "As the World Turns" (remember Tonio Reyes?). This month, the company performs the musical "The Fantasticks" as part of the arts festival.

The Bundy Center for the Arts, just south of town, was built by architect Harlow Carpenter in 1962 as a contemporary rural museum. After several reincarnations, it's a top arts venue for the community.

"We're trying to be an all-around center for the arts by offering visual arts, performing arts, music, theater, and the whole range," says Ruth Ann Pattee, operations director for the center.

The nonprofit Green Mountain Cultural Center, located in the renovated 1910 Joslyn Round Barn, hosts year-round art exhibits, theater productions, and musical events such as the three-week June opera festival. All of the rehearsals and a series of opera-related classes and lectures take place at the center and are open to the public.

"People can watch the making of an opera," says Tim Piper, co-owner of the Inn at the Round Barn, site of the Joslyn Round Barn. "They can see the creative directors putting the staging together, hang out with musical directors from the New York Met, and have lunch with opera singers who come from all over the world. It's like a fantasy baseball camp."

"The key to all the arts in the valley," Piper says, "is that people have an opportunity to be exposed to new art forms in a personal and intimate way."

It's nothing like watching TV.

The Skinner Barn

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The Valley Players

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valleyplayers.com

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