

## We Get a Treasure Back *Washington Stage Guild Returns to Full Production*

BY BRAD HATHAWAY

In the spring of 2007, Washington theater lovers entered what we expected to be a brief period of artistic deprivation when one of our most reliably literate theater companies temporarily suspended production pending a move into a new venue. Little did we know then how long and how painful the hiatus would be.

It was expected that the Washington Stage Guild would transition relatively rapidly and effortlessly into new quarters just as some of the other quality theater companies in our community had. Then the recession hit, and tragedy struck.

The recession dried up some of the sources of funding that were expected to enable the company to transition to a new venue in an office building near the Verizon Center. The sign had gone up on the building on G Street NW, but no theater emerged in the basement.

No sooner had we absorbed the news that the new venue was not to be, than real tragedy befell. John MacDonald, the 56-year-old producing artistic director who had guided the company through 21 seasons of delight, fell in his home and suffered fatal injuries.

The Washington Stage Guild, true to its name, had never been a one-man operation, but a collection of professional craftspeople who banded together to advance their art. Without John MacDonald, it would not be the same Guild, but it would continue.

Ann Norton, who had been MacDonald's partner in public and private endeavors as his wife and as executive director of the Guild, kept the core of the company together as they moved toward returning to production. Actor, director, writer and dramaturg Bill Largess was one of the founding members of the Guild and directed some of their finest pieces. He assumed the role of artistic director, and many of the actors continued their dedication to the effort.

A few seasons passed with only staged readings to keep the company's name before the public. Then, last fall, the company managed a single fully staged production as part of the International George Bernard Shaw Festival which they co-hosted with The Catholic University. Drawing as they so often have from the rich lode of treasure

from the pen of Shaw, they mounted an evening of two of his short plays under the collective title "Strange Bedfellows." Company veterans Vincent Clark, Laura Giannarelli, Helen Hedman, John Lescault, Lynn Steinmets and Alan Wade took the stage in the basement Callan Theater, and Washington theater-lovers rediscovered the pleasure of a Washington Stage Guild production.

Starting this month, the Guild is back, and it has a home – the Undercroft Theatre of the Mount Vernon Place United Methodist Church at 900 Massachusetts Ave. NW. It is a handsome, comfortable and intimate venue that is a vast improvement over the cramped, flat-floored and often too hot or too cold former rehearsal hall they

the past. There's Giannarelli, who can deliver a sly silent glance or a raucous laugh with equal aplomb, and Clark, who can make his character's confusion crystal clear to an audience. James Konicek brings his distinctively modulated voice and strong stage presence to the company to play the lord of the title.

This first show in the new venue will run through mid-March to be followed in April and May by a new production of High Whitmore's touching portrait of the friendship between playwright George Bernard Shaw, museum curator Sidney Cockerell and Dominican nun Dame Laurentia McLachlan. Using Shaw's own words,

Whitmore taps into the intellectual respect and camaraderie that marked an unusual friendship. Alan Wade, who was so very funny in both one-act plays making up last fall's "Strange Bedfellows," takes on director's duties this time out.

It is a tribute to John MacDonald's leadership that he left such a robust company upon his unexpected death. As a director, he had given us the delights of both standards and lesser known works by Shaw, but his scope was broader than that. With a sure touch for literary topics, he handled Sean O'Leary's portrait of Ezra Pound, J.B. Priestley's "An Inspector Calls," P.G. Wodehouse's adaptation of Fernc Molnar's "The Play's the Thing" as well as a package of Molnar's one-act plays.

Under MacDonald's leadership, the Guild fostered the works of other directors as well: Alan Wade, Charlotte Jones, Stephen Carpenter, and Largess.

I began to cover the Guild at the beginning of this decade. Unfortunately, I missed their work over the preceding 15 years. Rest assured I won't be missing any of their productions as they settle into their new home. You can join me by calling the Guild at 240-582-0050 or logging on at [www.stageguild.org](http://www.stageguild.org). Tickets are \$40 to \$50.

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Helen Hedman, John Lescault, Laura Giannarelli in "Strange Bedfellows" earlier this season.

had been using as a theater for way too long while looking for a permanent home.

The first show will be an Oscar Wilde short story adapted for the stage and directed by new Artistic Director Largess. It is "Lord Arthur Savile's Crime," which tells the tale of a British gentleman who, having been told by a fortune teller that he will commit a murder at some point in his life, decides to get it over with and put it behind him before taking a bride. His repeated efforts at homicide are frustrating, at least to him. There's a fine twist of an ending, which I will not reveal here.

The cast for this first full production in the new venue includes many of the performers who have made the Guild's shows such a pleasure in