

## Around Annapolis: Joe Thompson, a lover of the theater

By DIANE M. REY, For The Capital

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Since the first rehearsal in September, Joe Thompson had been in front, giving instruction and encouragement to the 35 young actors in the Children's Theatre of Annapolis' production of "Beauty and the Beast."

But at Sunday's cast party, the director sat at the back of the room, surveying the scene like a proud papa.

Like any good father, when the tears started to flow among the cast of 12- to 18-year-olds who had gathered to say goodbye following a nine-show run, he was there with the hugs.

The emotional highs and lows of the theater world are nothing new for this Bay Ridge resident.

A photography teacher at North County High School, Joe has a long history as an actor, writer, and director.

A board member of Colonial Players, he wrote and directed their "Cabaret for Kids," which led to the publication of two award-winning CDs of original family music.

Last year, Joe won the Washington Area Theater Community Honors Award for his original soundtrack to the Bowie Community Theater's production of "Dearly Departed."

"Beauty and the Beast" was his first time directing for CTA, however, and it brought back memories of his own start on the stage, as a youngster growing up in Annapolis.

He noted in the show's program that one of his first theatrical tasks "was helping to clean up bird doo-doo and rusty nails out of the blacksmith shop that would serve as a new home to Annapolis Summer Garden Theater."

With his longish hair and gap-toothed smile, it's not hard to imagine Joe as a teen trying to find his niche.

"It gave me a place to be," said Joe, now 54. "I still see theater as a safe, creative outlet for teens."

His own teens, 15-year-old twins Martin and Leslie, are sophomores at Annapolis High School and appear to be following in their father's footsteps.



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Director Joe Thompson, left, works with R.J. Pavel, 16 of Crofton, right, during the final rehearsal for Children's Theatre of Annapolis' recent production of "Beauty and the Beast."



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And both had roles in the recent show.

Martin played the lead character of Belle's father, Maurice, and served as the narrator for the show's opening sequence. As a chorus member, Leslie portrayed a milkmaid and a pepper shaker in the Beast's enchanted castle. Joe's wife, Susie, and friend and mentor Tom Stuckey, also contributed their talents as members of the stage crew.

CTA performances are typically family affairs, with younger siblings helping with props while mom and dad sell at the concessions during intermission. To Joe, it's what makes community theater so rewarding. "Families all working together to make something happen. It's my definition of magic," he said.

Joe admits that the on-stage magic he needed to bring one of his favorite fairy tales to life gave him a few sleepless nights. The technical challenges of transforming the Beast back into a prince involved several fog machines, strobe lights, a laser, and flash pots that shot flames into the air. But after an intense "tech week" of rehearsals at Anne Arundel Community College's Pascal Center, where the show was performed, "It came together like a jigsaw puzzle," he said.

The director's challenge is to bring the various components of a production together to create a unified whole. Show producer Debra Engler said Joe came with a clear vision of what he wanted to achieve with the show. Rather than mimic Disney's animated version of the story, Joe wanted the young actors to bring out the characters' complexities. "I wanted them to reach into themselves and find humanity," he said.

"He tried very hard to bend to the kids' level, to empathize with what they were really going through," said co-producer Sue Konick. "He was very creative in putting an emphasis on the individual kids so that every kid had their moment."

Archbishop Spalding junior R.J. Pavel, 16, of Crofton, said Joe's use of examples - and his sense of humor - helped him succeed in the challenging role of the beast.

"He got up close and personal with us and made us really comfortable," he said.

The result was one of the most successful shows in CTA's 48-year history. Box office manager Mark Espinosa said the final three shows played to a full house, something he's seen only once before in the last four years, during "Seussical: The Musical" in 2006.

While the statistics will go into the CTA record book, what will stick most in Joe's mind are the images of young actors learning, having fun, and creating something memorable.

"When you work with kids, the sheer exuberant joy that you see in their performance is just the most rewarding thing in the world," he said.

Children's Theatre of Annapolis will present "Annie Jr.," March 28-30, featuring a cast of children ages 8 to 14.

The next older-children's production, "Peter Pan," will be held in December in the company's new \$1 million theater, under construction at Bay Head Park near Cape St. Claire.

For more information, visit CTA at [www.childrenstheatrefannapolis.org](http://www.childrenstheatrefannapolis.org).

Send your news tips and ideas to Diane Rey at [aroundannapolis@comcast.net](mailto:aroundannapolis@comcast.net).

- No Jumps-