

Fifty Plus

Lifestyle Magazine of the Triangle

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Guest Writers

By Mary Jekielek Insprucker

June 2005

Jetting around the world, hush-hush meetings with TV and movie executives, and producing and directing productions is not often what comes to mind when thinking of someone over 70. However, that is exactly what life is like for 71-year-old Gennaro D'Onofrio.

In fact, D'Onofrio's latest offering is "History of Theatre," a series of 15 scenes depicting the eras of theatre throughout the ages from Greek theatre to Shakespearean to modern time. The production includes two musical numbers and comedy numbers, and will be performed at the North Raleigh Arts and Creative Theatre (NRACT). "It's a showcase of scenes that are entertaining and educational without stuffing it down your throat," said D'Onofrio, who researched and wrote the artistic program.

D'Onofrio originally started life out as an interior designer, which eventually led him to designing sets for small theatres back in 1955. That eventually led to a life in theatre, acting, directing, and producing plays by Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and others in Europe, NY, FL, and CO. D'Onofrio was also the creator and founder of the RiverRun International Film Festival.

D'Onofrio is quick to point out there is a market for mature adults at the theatre to act, work on costumes, and other volunteer activities, as well as attending classes. "I was surprised there were no seniors in my beginners' acting class, which analyzes scripts and teaches how to apply emotions to a character," said D'Onofrio, NRACT's senior instructor. "If I could get at least five people I would be happy to put together a class for senior citizens on this, or backstage work such as set and costume design."

D'Onofrio encourages older adults to become involved in theatre. "Theatre is important for older people because it is mentally and physically stimulating. Just like golf or tennis, it's another way to stay healthy. The brain is a muscle and you need to exercise it, instead of retiring and just sitting and watching TV and wasting away."

Wasting away was exactly what 68-year-old Bob McKelvy was doing prior to joining NRACT. "I was pretty much in a rut," said McKelvy. "I was a widower not doing much of anything."

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That ended when at age 65 McKelvy's son talked him into an audition for the theatre's production of the "Odd Couple." "My son sucked me into it," said McKelvy. "He'd been acting for several years and talked me into reading for the show. Low and behold, I got the part of Vinnie, one of the card players."

McKelvy, who challenged himself with singing and dancing numbers, said he was pleasantly surprised that he got the part off a cold reading. The experience lead to being cast in NRACT's "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" and "Babes in Toyland." Now, McKelvy is hoping to get some larger parts and although he does not believe he will make it to the big screen he said, "I wouldn't turn anything down."

McKelvy, who would like to point out he's single and available, expanded his horizons by getting involved at the theatre, and he advises others to do so. For McKelvy it provides bonus rewards when he greets the audience after performances. "At the end of 'Babes in Toyland,' a 4-year-old came up to me and said, 'I liked you the best because you were the funniest.' That's why I do it; that's what it's all about!"

NRACT, established three years ago, is a non-profit community based performing arts center. Many older adults are involved in several facets of the theatre right down to bookkeeping.

"We provide an alternative outlet for youth and adults, while stressing proper instruction in the performing arts to produce the highest professional quality in a family and community oriented atmosphere," said Melissa Langston, marketing director for NRACT. "Our goal is to spread the word about the performing arts, while giving individuals and families alike the opportunity for involvement and fellowship.

"We are pocketbook and family friendly," continued Langston. "In our three years we've done productions of all kinds for kids, main stage adults, and teenage programs that focused on different social issues."

"History of Theatre" will be presented June 17 and 18 at North Raleigh Arts and Creative Theatre in the Greystone shopping center at 7713-51 Leadmine Rd. Times: Reception 6:30 p.m., Show 8:00 p.m. For cost and other information, call 919-866-0228

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