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May/June 2005

# VERMONT

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## The Vermont Arts & Culture Issue



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For more information about the performances, or to support the OTW mission, which is also supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Vermont Arts Council, call (802) 824-3821. •

Arlington-resident Kate Fox is the publisher of this magazine.

# Summer Songs

Peter Boynton's programs at the Skinner Barn bring a little bit of Broadway to the Green Mountains.

Story by Janet Hubbard

**S**UMMER SHOWS AT THE SKINNER Barn in Waitsfield usually start at dusk, and the sense of mystery and anticipation that precedes those first musical notes is heightened by the natural backdrop of the mountains in the west, cast into shadow by the setting sun. "The way the sun sets," says Nick Corley, a New York-based director, actor, and teacher, "you know you are in a soulful place." The exquisitely restored barn is a reflection of its owner, Peter Boynton.

In the early 1990s, Boynton—who achieved stardom as a soap-opera actor—started dreaming of a summer theater that would benefit from both the professionalism of his colleagues in New York and the talents of Vermonters who worked in the arts. His first move was to get involved with the Heritage Museum project in Waitsfield, and he spent eight years on the board, trying to create a museum that

The Skinner Barn in Waitsfield is an extraordinary setting for cultural events. Here, dance instructor Monica Cauldwell (center) takes five in the barn with a group of theater students.



PHOTO: PETER BOYNTON

would have a performance space. Unfortunately, that project fell apart because of permit problems, but an undaunted Boynton began thinking in a different direction. Described by his 13-year-old daughter Noni as "hard-working and diligent," by student Sam McCausland as "enthusiastic," and by Corley as "feisty," Boynton is the kind of man who rarely shies from a challenge. It's a powerful personality cocktail that is one of the keys to his success.

## Starting from Scratch

Peter first came to Waitsfield on a ski trip in 1985 with his friend Greg Marx (grandson of Groucho) with whom he was working on *As the World Turns*. (Peter played the villain, Tonio Reyes.) He bought his property in two stages: the farmhouse property was purchased in 1989 and the dairy barn, originally built in 1891, in 1993. Peter started the barn renovation in 1994 and named it the Skinner Barn in honor of the barn's original owners, the Daniel Skinner family. Flanked by the majestic Northfield Ridge to the east and the mountains that host the Sugarbush and Mad River Glen ski areas to the west, it offers an extraordinary setting for cultural events.

Boynton began working toward establishing a theater in the barn. Eventually, he received the necessary permits, managing to allay the skepticism of a few neighbors. He created a nonprofit corporation, which needed a board of directors. Thus, the Commons Group was born. (The barn is located on the Waitsfield Commons Road.) Its goals were simple: to start small and operate in the black, to insist on excellence as a means of attracting a loyal following, and to involve the community.

The same care and attention to detail that went into making the barn an inviting place for performers went into organizing a cultural venue for all ages. Boynton started in 2000 with contra dances, which involve another form of music he has studied and loves. Soon,

it wasn't unusual to find more than a hundred dancers *do-si-do-ing* their partners in the barn on a summer Friday night.

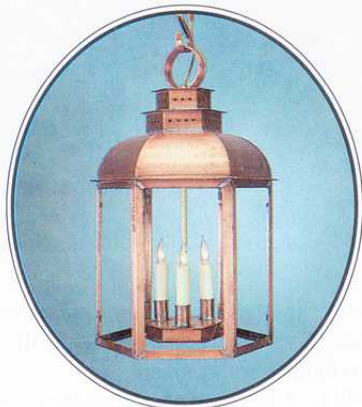
His next idea was to bring together a group of Vermont musicians to create a cabaret series. Members of the audience would enter the barn and sit at round tables, where they could order wine or soda from a cash bar. The series was instantly popular, and the performers had a blast. Wendy Fuller, a lawyer by day in Burlington, transforms into a torch singer in the Skinner Barn by night, and Judy Milstein, a veteran of the New York stage and a popular actress and teacher in Vermont, adds her outrageous antics to most cabarets. Boynton—having spent the day cleaning the barn with his teen assistants, mowing the field, writing down reservations, and greeting guests at the door—calmly joins his peers on stage, launching into a song as though he had spent the day sitting on the porch.

Over the past four years, the Skinner Barn has also hosted theater camps for children and teens, musicals, weddings, a one-woman show, a French chanteuse, and two plays that continued on to the New York Fringe Festival. Two musicals, *The Robber Bridegroom* and *Songs for a New World*, produced by Boynton, were major successes. This summer's August musical, *Bat Boy*—which director Corley describes as "*Little Shop of Horrors* meets *Dracula*"—promises to be another hit.

## Passing the Torch

Three years ago, Boynton, who has directed the spring musicals at Harwood Union High School for the past nine years, decided to start a musical theater camp for kids ages 13 through 18. He based the camp on a successful model that he had experienced first-hand when he was a senior at the University of Massachusetts: In a program called The National Theater Institute at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, he studied with Broadway professionals who taught the stu-

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## Community Arts

dents music, dance, acting, set design, and other aspects of the theater. The Skinner Barn's musical-theater camp is already a success, and is fully booked far in advance.

Boynton's plan was to interweave his various projects in such a way that they would connect young thespians and singers to professionals and to each other. The "overlapping" effect that he hoped for is already in evidence. For example, student Julian DeFelice—who was featured in Boynton's Harwood Union productions of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Into The Woods*, and *The Wizard of Oz*—also attended the camp. The summer before his senior year, he landed the part of Goat in *The Robber Bridegroom* at the Skinner Barn, and he was suddenly working with both local and New York professionals.

Stephanie Maas, who graduated from Ithaca College last year, says that Boynton had been a big influence on her decision to go into musical theater. She is currently touring with a professional musical production of *Amelia Bedelia*, playing the lead. Chris Grabher, a former Harwood Union student who thinks of Boynton as a mentor, attended at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts for three years following high school and is earning his living in theater in New York. "Peter and I are in constant touch," he says.

Another success story is Sam McCausland, an 8th grader at Harwood Union who has attended the camps for three years. Boynton can't hide the pride in his voice when he talks about the boy's progress: "When Sam auditioned for the production of *Oklahoma* at Harwood Union, he came on stage and sang a whole song and carried the tune. When he started coming to the camps three years ago, he couldn't match a single note."

In 2003, the Skinner Barn launched a camp for kids ages nine to 12. It, too, fills up before summer, and Boynton has had no problems attracting accomplished teachers for the younger students. Highly acclaimed choreographer Robin Fawcett, who met Boynton when she choreographed a show he was in at the Vermont Stage Company, teaches improvisation, stage combat, and neutral mask work.

"I feel that I am participating in something incredibly special when I make that drive from Burlington to Waitsfield," she says. "I am so moved by the setting, the beauty of the barn, and the congregation of really special artists presenting a unique opportunity to these young people."

### The Next Level

With the Commons Group entering its fifth year, Boynton and Corley decided to mount an ambitious production, *Bat Boy: The Musical*. The play is about "an outsider trying to fit in," according to Corley. "It's about how the world treats outsiders."

The title comes from a famous story in *The Weekly World News*, a supermarket tabloid, and whether or not Bat Boy really existed is left up to the viewer to decide.

A looming problem was how the Commons Group could afford to produce such a large-scale musical. Though businesses and individuals have stepped in to sponsor individual performances in the past, there has never been a full-season sponsor. The solution to this dilemma came in the form of Win Smith, one of the owners of Sugarbush Ski Resort and a creator of the Clay Brook at Lincoln Peak project, who agreed to sponsor the entire season.

"I am elated," Boynton says. "Though I have more fund-raising to do, it is manageable now." What means the most, though, is that he is being supported by the community. Boynton and Smith are already talking about holding cabarets in the new 60-seat theater that will be a part of the Clay Brook project.

Corley, ever enthusiastic, says, "Summer in Vermont is glorious. You get that feeling of summer when you were a kid. I love the way we walk into town for coffee and watch the kids jumping into the Mad River. It is magical." Anyone entering the Skinner Barn at dusk would agree. •

Janet Hubbard is a freelance writer who lives in northern Vermont.

## Art from the Heart

Story by Melanie Menagh

Photographs by Joseph Healy

**T**HE GRASS ROOTS ART AND Community Effort (GRACE) takes it as a given that art enriches people whether they're at the beginning or end of their lives, or if they're experiencing extraordinary challenges along the way. It's hard to argue with the results at the Greensboro Nursing Home one recent Friday morning.

On Fridays, a dozen or so residents gather around tables to paint or draw or do multi-