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Theater technician enjoys playing role of ‘invisible actor’

MONSON – Rich Dionne’s theatrical talents have been lighting up the Memorial Hall stage for nearly 20 years, but most audience members have never seen him.

That’s the way he likes it.

“If they never look at you, then you’re doing your job,” said Dionne, the longtime lighting and sound technician for Monson Arts Council theatrical productions. “You’re like an invisible actor.”

Although he may not be recognizable to theatergoers, Dionne said he finds his work very rewarding. “You get your own credit inside,” he said.

Dionne’s humble expertise will again be on display during the arts council’s upcoming production of “I Hate Hamlet,” a two-act comedy by Paul Rudnick. The play will be presented April 11, 12, 18 and 19 at 8 p.m., and April 13 and 20 at 2 p.m. in Memorial Hall on Main Street in Monson.

A native of Brimfield, Dionne has resided in Palmer for many years. He is the son of Robert and the late Jeannette Dionne and is a graduate of Tantasqua Regional Vocational High School. His work for the arts council began about 20 years ago when he was working part-time for M-PACT, the local cable television company, which was then located in the basement of Memorial Hall.

Dionne credits Monson resident Gary Monte and former resident Bruce MacKay with encouraging him to learn about theatrical lighting and sound techniques. Dionne has been honing these skills since then, welcoming the challenges that come with each new production.

In addition to the arts council plays, Dionne has also done lighting and sound for other theater groups in the Greater Springfield area and beyond, including Panache Productions, Exit 7 Players, Wilbraham United Players, Disturbed Theater, Noshoba Valley Players and Greene Room Productions.

“With every play, you’re starting from scratch,” he said. “You’ve got different shadow problems, different sound effects.” For “I Hate Hamlet,” he said, he will be creating magical effects, such as a fireplace and wall sconces that light up spontaneously.

Typically, Dionne said, he has to run two microphones independently and has to use “ten fingers for 15 lights.” Noting that the lights and sound effects are “invisible characters,” he said, “If you come to a show and never see a technical person, then they are doing their jobs.”

But, he added, “When something goes wrong, everybody looks up at the technical people.” Often, he said, these mishaps are out of the technician’s control, such as when actors forget their lines – or the time a light fell onto the stage floor during a Springfield production of the female version of Neil Simon’s “The Odd Couple.”

Without missing a beat, however, the actress playing the fastidious Florence cleaned up the broken light and continued on with the scene, Dionne recalled. Another unexpected technical challenge occurred during a production of the Jack Neary play “To Forgive, Divine” in Memorial Hall.

“During one scene, a bat came down and dive-bombed the actor playing the priest,” Dionne said. Fortunately, an unflappable technical assistant opened a door in the balcony, allowing the frightened winged creature to fly out of the auditorium.

Most of the time, though, Dionne is in control of the lighting board and sound effects, carefully following the script and producing the proper effects at just the right time.

“I don’t think Rich has ever missed a cue,” said actor Forris Day Jr., who has performed in several arts council productions. Day, who will portray the hyperactive Hollywood director, Gary Peter Lefkowitz, in “I Hate Hamlet,” praised Dionne’s reliability and support of the actors and director.

Barbara Keffer, producer for “I Hate Hamlet,” also had praise for Dionne’s skills and reliability. “He’s extremely clever with all the sound equipment and lighting equipment,” she said. “He gives us advice about buying equipment and he goes out of his way to make sure we have what we need.”

“He is so easy to work with,” Keffer continued. “He is honest and hardworking. He’s just a good guy.”

Asked what gives him the most satisfaction as a theater technician, Dionne referred to the classic television series “Star Trek.”

“It’s like when Captain Kirk is getting blasted by the aliens and he turns to Scotty for help and Scotty fixes it,” said Dionne, a self-confessed “Trekkie.”

“I’m the ‘Scotty’ and I fix it,” he said.

Tickets for “I Hate Hamlet,” Dionne’s latest “enterprise,” are \$14 for general admission and \$12 for students and seniors. They may be purchased at the door or by calling the producer at 267-4286. Patrons who dine at three local restaurants, Mustang Sally’s, Beth and Deb’s, and Tenth Planet Pizza, will receive a coupon worth \$2 off on their play tickets.