

Wheelock Family Theatre Begins Next Act—at BU

Acclaimed company remains focused on diversity, inclusion

WHEN BU ANNOUNCED LAST year that it would merge with Wheelock College, one of the first questions on people's minds was what would happen to the Wheelock Family Theatre (WFT), the award-winning children's theater company known for its multicultural productions and unwavering commitment to producing inclusive, affordable theater.

The answer to that question will be apparent on October 26, when the now BU-owned theater kicks off its 38th season with a production of *Gooney Bird Greene and Her True Life Adventures*. Launched in 1981, WFT is not going anywhere.

"The message that came through loud and clear from BU is an appreciation of the mission, the work done here, and its intrinsic value," says Jeri Hammond, WFT director of education.

Over its lifetime, Wheelock Family Theatre has produced more than 100 mainstage productions seen by more than half a million people—from children's classics like *Charlotte's Web* to family-friendly musicals (*Peter Pan*, *The Sound of Music*) to issue-oriented plays such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and last season's smash production of Lin-Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights*.

The company has earned a national reputation for artistically ambitious productions diverse in both character and cast and affordable for families and school groups throughout the community (tickets typically cost \$20 to \$40 before discounts). Performances usually include some kind of family-friendly workshop or event that gives audience members behind-the-scenes glimpses or an opportunity to meet with the cast. None of that



Leo Ruckenstein and Lila Berinsky (background) perform in last spring's Wheelock Family Theatre production of *Stuart Little*.

is about to change now that it has become part of Boston University, WFT leaders say.

The theater, which will remain at its longtime home at 180 Riverway on the Fenway Campus, recently underwent a management reorganization and is now run by a trio of WFT veterans. Before she became artistic director this spring, Emily Ranii (CFA'13) directed at the theater and was a member of Wheelock College's performing arts faculty. She is

academic program head of the BU Summer Theater Institute at the College of Fine Arts and a BU Opera Institute lecturer. Hammond has been connected with the theater in one way or another for 36 of its 38 years. And Keith Orr, now WFT administrative director, had been marketing and development director.

For this year at least, the theater will be under the aegis of the BU Arts Initiative. "Wheelock Family Theatre

embodies the best of what theater is,” says Ty Furman, Arts Initiative director, “building community, self-expression, and exploring what it is like to walk in someone else’s shoes in both mainstage productions and the extensive educational programs.”

At the same time, a yearlong strengths assessment is underway, with the help of the theater’s existing advisory board and a task force of BU stakeholders. “We want to gauge where WFT fits into the other pieces of the puzzle,” says Orr.

As part of that assessment, the University has hired Washington, D.C.-based consultant Kim Peter Kovac, artistic director of the Kennedy Center’s Performances for Young Audiences from 1983 to 2017.

“I think of this as working with the gangs at WFT and the School of Theatre to assist in expanding and tweaking the process of elegantly integrating the entities,” says Kovac, who is still a Kennedy Center artistic advisor.

“It starts by listening, trying to understand the long- and short-term histories, administrative and pragmatic as well as artistic, and helping them articulate *their* goals,” he says, “as well as clarifying practical steps and timelines to move forward in the best possible way. It’s about process, not about an end point.”

“The possibilities are compelling,” adds Jim Petosa, School of Theatre director and a CFA professor of directing and dramatic criticism. “During the coming year, the company will embark on a serious analysis of its place in the national conversation around intergenerational theater-producing, with an eye to its participation at the national level. Emily is a gifted theater artist. I’m excited to see what becomes of the program in the coming years.”

In addition to mounting three or four mainstage productions each year, WFT offers a wide range of theater classes and



Keith Orr (from left) is Wheelock Family Theatre’s administrative director, Jeri Hammond its educational director, and Emily Ranii its artistic director.

workshops and works extensively with area schools and community organizations to provide hands-on training to students. The company has earned numerous honors, among them the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts LEAD Award for Excellence in Accessibility Leadership and a Christopher Reeve Foundation Award, for its efforts to make theater accessible for all of Boston’s diverse communities.

The theater has a core of nine staffers, augmented by additional hires (30 for its summer program alone) as well as a cast and crew for each production. It has its own operating budget and tries to hit breakeven or better through ticket sales, tuition, and fundraising.

The WFT weekday student matinee performances bring an estimated 15,000 elementary through high school students to the theater each season from all over New England. A gift from the Yawkey Foundation helped subsidize the program for 2018–2019.

“We had a group—I love this—they came in from Martha’s Vineyard,” Orr says. “They had to leave there at five in the morning

to get here for 10:30, get the kids to the ferry, get the school bus on the ferry, drive up from Hyan-nis. The whole thing was like a D-Day invasion, but the kids were great and the parents that came were so excited. It was cool on a lot of levels.”

“I’m thrilled that BU has embraced the theater and is really making efforts to strengthen it and look for ways it can play a bigger role, not only in the community—I think it’s done that well—but in the academic life of the University,” says David Chard, dean ad interim of the BU Wheelock College of Education & Human Development, who was Wheelock president before the merger.

First up for the new season, *Gooney Bird Greene and Her True Life Adventures*, adapted from the Lois Lowry children’s novel of the same name, is a play designed for all ages. Next is *Ragtime*, the Tony-winning musical based on the novel by E. L. Doctorow. The season’s last show is a theatrical adaptation of a Roald Dahl classic, *James and the Giant Peach*. And in keeping with WFT tradition, all of the productions will feature diverse casts. **JB**