

LOCAL PRIDE

LIONHEART THEATRE OFFERS
GRASSROOTS DRAMA THAT ROARS

BY ROBERT J. NEBEL



Max Lucado's "You Are Special" was the talk of the town when it was staged before the Norcross Fourth of July fireworks.

It is 6:30 on a Tuesday evening and Tanya Carroll is jangling a huge set of keys in hand as she jumps out of her minivan. This Norcross mother ushers herself to the front doors of the Norcross Presbyterian Church. Parents and children eagerly file behind her to enter a darkened reception area. She flips on the fluorescent lights to reveal a church lobby festooned with flyers and memorabilia. Posters of upcoming events line the cinderblock walls. Stacks of bibles rest neatly on tables. A letter from a church member who is serving overseas catches the eye; reminding those who choose to view it, that there is indeed a war being waged on the other side of the world.

In stark contrast to this soldier's letter is the sight of Carroll who is in the center of the room gathering her thoughts. Dressed in a Pike Nursery uniform, complete with the company emblazoned cap and a nametag that proudly sports her name in capital letters, Carroll is on

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Director Tanya Carroll



"The Three Little Wolves and The Big Bad Pig" is just one of the many children's shows that Carroll has staged at alternative venues including Norcross' Thrasher Park.

her own mission — to direct a children's play written by Max Lucado titled "You Are Special." At this moment, she does not have all of her actors. Some of the sets are not ready. And the lead actor, 7-year-old Karan Ramdas Ganta, has most of his lines down ... but not quite.

In short, Carroll needs to get down to business. She is in serious crunch mode. Children, who range from ages 6 to 12, follow her into a dim classroom to begin a set of intense rehearsals. On this particular night, no parents are allowed inside and the doors are closed.

Carroll emerges from the room exhausted, but somewhat relieved knowing that she made progress with the kids' lines and blocking. Welcome to the world of grassroots theater where the blood, sweat and tears come from the community.

Scenes Made From Scratch

In this small world, there is no venue, no paid actors and the sets and costumes are homemade. This is a labor of love for Carroll, who has been staging productions like "You Are Special" in non-traditional settings for the past five years under the name of the Lionheart Theatre Company. Carroll's husband Mike, who is an actor/director in the nonprofit community theater, came up with the Lionheart name. "When we wanted to start this venture, Mike woke me up at 3 in the morning and said, 'Listen to me. Lionheart! How does that sound?'" Tanya recalled, adding that her husband said, "I want people to say, 'I wonder what Lionheart is doing this weekend?'" Mike remembered that night well. "I wanted a name that was not 'Little Town Players.' I wanted something with panache and that said we make bold choices," he said.

Lionheart has lived up to those bold choices. Since the company's inception, the Carrolls have staged multiple, simultaneous productions. Plays including "The Man Who Came to Dinner," "The Frog Prince" and the "Rain Maker" have given Lionheart a firm footing in Gwinnett County, but the couple wants to expand and strengthen the theater's reach. "I want to establish ourselves as one of the leading theaters in the Gwinnett community," Mike



Lionheart offers acting opportunities for the young and old.

constructing the sets. "Tanya is the driving force behind us," Mike admitted. "She envisions the productions and I build them."

Even though the debut of "You Are Special" was staged in front of a sweat-drenched audience in 90-degree heat, Carroll pulled it off without a hitch. All of the actors were present and her 7-year-old star nailed his lines. His mother Sudha said that Karan felt a sense of accomplishment that he would not have found anywhere else. "He has had the acting bug for quite some time," she noted. "If he continues to show interest in this, I will bring him back in."

Lionheart's Greatest Hits

Seeing successes like "You Are Special" is what keeps Carroll going. She followed that production with "Stone Soup," an Ann McGovern story about a hungry peasant boy who finds an ingenious way of getting fed.

One of Mike's personal favorites is a 90-minute solo performance held at the Berkeley Lake Chapel. He played the ghost of John Barrymore in Jason Miller's "Barrymore's Ghost," a daunting challenge many actors would rather not face. If he had any reservations about facing an audience in this soliloquy, one would have never known it. "Mike researches his roles carefully," said director

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said. "We believe in its values. At Lionheart, anyone can jump in and do this. You can act, direct, build and design sets, and run sound and lights." This organic feel to Lionheart makes volunteers feel welcomed with open arms.

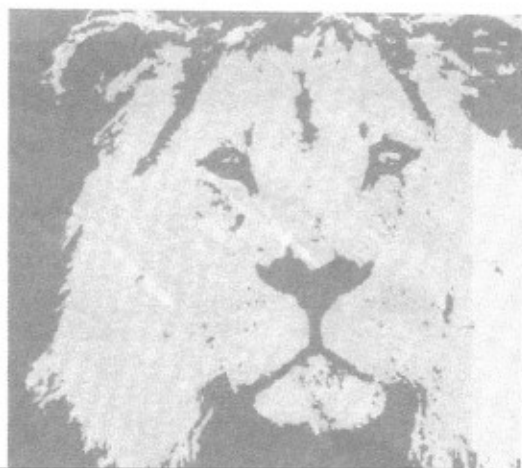
While optimism and ambition run high with the husband-and-wife team, both feel that they have yet to overcome their biggest challenge — finding a permanent venue. While Norcross Presbyterian, where Carroll has been a member for 10 years, welcomes many of the religious-oriented shows, secular productions, which make up most of the schedule, have played at places like the Berkeley Lake Chapel, Olde Town Lilburn, Norcross' Thrasher Park and even The Royal, an art gallery not too far from the park.

"They performed in my gallery for approximately a year-and-a-half," recalled Terry F. Robinson, owner of The Royal. "Their shows were so popular that we packed as many as 50-plus people during many of their performances. That speaks to the quality of work performed by the volunteer actors and actresses." After last year's "A Charlie Brown Christmas" ran at The Royal, Robinson and the Carrolls came to realize that Lionheart had officially outgrown the space. It was a bittersweet parting after the show's final performance. Today, Carroll remains steadfast in her approach to finding a venue. "Right now, we are venue hopping," she said. "We just have to find the right one."

As they continue their quest for theater space, the Carrolls carry on with their devotion to live theater in the suburbs. "They put a tremendous amount of effort that is required to keep a not-for-profit theater group going," said Jim Fox, whose daughters were in a recent production of "You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown." "Their love of theater has given hundreds of people the opportunity to experience and/or participate in quality local theater." Fox himself has acted in past productions, as well as helped with building the sets and operating the lights.

A Match Made in Heaven

Mike and Tanya Carroll met at a Stagedoor Players audition in 1989 when the group was preparing for a one-act festival. Carroll was trying out for the part of a granddaughter and Mike, a then-thirtysomething aspiring actor, was auditioning for the grandfather role. "It wasn't in the script, but she kissed



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me on the cheek," he recalled. "When we finished reading, I introduced myself in the hall. I went back into the room to read again and when I came back out, she was gone." The two would meet again when they returned to see the final cast, showing up at the board at the same time. At that moment, they knew they were meant for each other. "Five minutes one way or the other and she would have driven off," he said. "It was fate." The pair married six months later.

As they raised their two daughters, Suzanne and Ally, both were compelled to draw on their love of the theater. Even though Carroll earned a degree in theater from Georgia Southern, she put her acting dreams on hold. Mike, who works in construction, felt the same.

Without quitting their day jobs, the Carrolls are embarking on a venture that they cherish together, and it works. Each of them brings a unique set of skills to the table; she prefers to direct most of the productions, while he enjoys acting and

LIONHEART PERFORMS
"THE GOOD DOCTOR"
BY NEIL SIMON

Nov. 11-13

Dinner Theater at The Flying Saucer Café
in Lawrenceville

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7 p.m. for dinner. Show begins at 8 p.m.

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and beverage

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Debbie McLaughlin. "It makes directing easier." For the role, Mike ensconced himself into John Barrymore's life. To get to know the character, Mike read "Hamlet" because Barrymore played him in 1927, which was the height of his career. He watched Barrymore's films and even found out that Barrymore was into astrology. Mike was modest about his performance, crediting the sets, lighting and McLaughlin's directing for making the show such a hit. Mike directed McLaughlin, an actress herself, in a previous Lionheart production of "Radio TBS," an all-women show. "[It was] about 10 women in a South Florida trailer park, and two of them broadcast out of the trailer," Mike said. "They were trashy women. Debbie's character was the moral conscience of the show."

Community Dedication

Lionheart Theatre is a place where egos are checked at the door. The Carrolls' mantra is that anyone who is interested in participating can do so without fear of being intimidated. After Neil Simon's "The Good Doctor" ends its run this month, 2006 looks like it will be a busy year, providing ample opportunities to those who wish to gain theater experience. Productions of "The Still Alarm," "Divorce Southern Style" and "The Bus Stops Here" are on the docket. The team behind Lionheart has a bright future and is ever thankful for the support coming from the church, area businesses and the community in general. "We have such a wonderful core group of volunteers that the money, time and help are no problem," Carroll said. "It is just that we do not have a home." ✦

Photos courtesy of the Lionheart Theatre.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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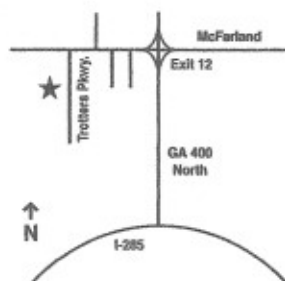
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