

Community

Equal parts of art and ministry

By Vernon Fueston
Bertie Ledger-Advance

One of the few Christian musical theater companies in the eastern United States will present the scriptural story of Mary and Joseph for the Christmas season in Edenton this year.

The play, "Let Us Adore Him" by Gloria Emmerich, will premier as a dinner theater production on Saturday, Nov. 17, with shows on Saturdays and Tuesdays, and will run through Saturday, Dec. 15 at Leon Nixon's Catering and Banquet Facility in Edenton.

The Rocky Hock Playhouse in one of perhaps two or three Christian musical theater companies still operating east of the Mississippi River, said the Playhouse's director, Jeff Emmerich.

Founded in 1997, the company has worked from three locations in Chowan County and was located until recently in Washington. Today the Rocky Hock Playhouse operates out of Leon Nixon's Catering and Banquet Facility in Edenton and offers its productions as a dinner theater.

In tough economic times, Rocky Hock has been a survivor. The company has done that by cutting costs without cutting the quality of its product.

"One of the reasons this company works is because everybody works. Nobody has to be told what to do, they just dig in and do it," Jeff Emmerich said.

"We don't have another crew that we have to pay for all of the set changes and construction and sewing. The cast is multitasking and multitalented all the time."

Patrons who come to a performance have the added fun of being waited on by the cast before the curtain goes up. The audience sits in padded chairs around circular dining tables and watches the play from their seats once the meal is done.

Gloria Emmerich, Jeff's wife, writes the scripts and music for the shows. She describes the music as classic musical theater or "Broadway" style, though some productions use contemporary gospel songs or classic hymns, when appropriate.

For the production, all the music is Emmerich's with the exception of the classic carol "Oh, Holy Night," which is sung at one point.

Writing for Christian theater is a special challenge.

"When you're writing for Easter or Christmas, you can't change the scriptures," Gloria said.

"The story has got to stay the same. You may add characters into a Christmas show. This year we have Joseph's sister, who also happens to be Mary's best friend. "Of course the whole story is in the Bible, but I have to elaborate on that to make it musical theater. Joseph and Mary in the Bible, they are real people.

"Mary and Joseph have a relationship. Who isn't going to be emotional when they find out they're pregnant? I try to flesh all those emotions out, there is anger - her parents, how do they respond? They are in shock."

Jeff Emmerich said that the company tries to be inclusive in its interpretation of the scriptural account on stage.

"We try to stay away from doctrinal things, things that divide Christians," he said.

"We find that people across the board in all denominations can come and enjoy our shows because we just try to put the Bible story on its feet and make it come to life. We don't shove doctrine at anybody."

He said that 250,000 patrons have viewed the company's productions so far with only a handful of e-mails or letters questioning Gloria's interpretations or depictions of Biblical accounts.

The Playhouse has a cast of seven. Jeff and Gloria



VERNON FUESTON/BERTIE Ledger-Advance

Edenton's Rocky Hock Playhouse has performed its brand of Christian musical theater to more than 250,000 audience members since it was formed in 1997. This year the cast of seven will present its annual Christmas play, a new musical titled "Let Us Adore Him."

Emmerich take the stage along with their daughter, Holly, who is both a singer and an actress.

Holly plays Anna, Mary's mother. Jeff plays Joseph and Gloria will play Elizabeth.

Mariah Schierer came to the Playhouse from Arene, Maine. She worked in secular theater for several years but was looking for a Christian playhouse when she ran across the Emmerich's website.

"I really just wanted to focus on ministry and give a little bit of my gift back to God," she said.

It was a good move for her. She met and married her husband, a fellow cast member, this last summer.

Nathan Schierer had just graduated from college and was looking for work as an actor when he auditioned for a place on the Rocky Hock Playhouse cast. He landed a position along with the job of box office manager. He plays the Angel Gabriel in this production.

Mindi Cunningham is a theater student at the College of the Albemarle and met the Emmerichs during COA's production of "The Fantastics." Jeff Emmerich serves as director of COA's drama department.

After appearing again in the school's production of "The Miracle Worker," she joined the Rocky Hock Playhouse this year and plays Joannah, Joseph's sister. The daughter of a pastor, she said she's very comfortable with the Christian nature of the Playhouse.

In fact, she said, that's the point. All of the cast members say that they view working on the Playhouse's Christian-themed productions as a ministry.

(Above) Chicken wire is still visible during rehearsal as (Back Row From the Left) Mindi Cunningham, Gloria Emmerich, Darryl Stallings and (Front Row) Mariah Schierer and Jeff Emmerich greet the baby Jesus. (Not shown, Holly Emmerich and Nathan Schierer.)

"It's a bonus to be around these people who are working for God and they are great people, too," she said.

Darryl Stallings of Tyner has been with the Playhouse for 10 years. He says he's been singing as long as he can remember, having started singing solos in church at the age of six. He also performs with the gospel group, Step of Faith.

He, too, said the Christian aspect of working at the Playhouse is what attracts him to the stage.

"I do this as a ministry. I have no aspirations whatsoever of doing secular theater," Stallings said.

The Playhouse's patrons come from a wide geographical range. Many locals attend, but others come in bus tours organized by churches and senior centers.

An adult dinner theater ticket costs \$28.95 for adults with discounts for seniors, children and groups of 10 to 24 and 25 or more people.

But a tough economy has put pressure on the playhouse. Jeff Emmerich said it's been difficult, but he believes the Playhouse still has a mission to perform.

Gloria said it's a balancing act to make it all work.

"It's a ministry and also a business. You have to balance that all out," she said.

"You have to do a lot of praying, especially in this economy. But in the end... it's all for the Lord."

For more information about the Rocky Hock Playhouse and "Let Us Adore Him," contact their box office at (252) 482-4621 or visit them on the web at www.rockyhockplayhouse.com.

Overdue recognition

By Barry Ward
Bertie Ledger-Advance

WINDSOR - The Bertie County Board of Education righted a past wrong by acknowledging Bertie High School (BHS) Principal Calvin Moore's service to both the school system and the country.

Moore was presented with the Certificate of Appreciation Board Chair Award at the Nov. 5 monthly school board meeting.

Moore is a member of the Army National Guard and was principal of BHS when he was called to serve in Iraq. Upon returning two years ago, Moore was not allowed to continue his role as BHS principal.

According to published reports, when Moore came back he was told he could keep the title of principal, but not perform any of the administrative duties since the position was already filled.

He was offered a job as principal of the alternative school, but wanted his original position as BHS principal.



BARRY WARD/Bertie Ledger-Advance

Calvin Moore receives a plaque for his service military served from Board of Education Chair Gloria Lee.

According to published reports, Moore said it was a violation of law to not allow a military officer to resume the position they had before going off to serve.

Eventually he became assistant principal of Bertie Middle School and later BHS principal where he currently serves.

Bertie County Board of Education Chair Gloria Lee told the Ledger-Advance that the award to Moore was her idea.

"I just wanted to find a way to recognize his accomplishments in military service," said Lee.

Lee said the school board neglected to honor Moore's service when he returned to Bertie County, and wanted to correct the error.

She said both Moore and the school system have put their problems in the past. She said Moore is an outstanding educator and person.

She said when he was stationed in Iraq he still found time to stay in touch with Bertie County Schools staff members through the voice-over Internet software, Skype.

"I think we owe him some gratitude," said Lee. □

'Warrior's' jersey retired at BHS

By Barry Ward
Bertie Ledger-Advance

WINDSOR - In a unanimous decision, the Bertie County Board of Education voted to retire Bertie High School (BHS) basketball jersey number 24, Nov. 5.

The jersey was worn by BHS graduate and current Golden State Warrior Kent Bazemore.

Bazemore's mother, Glynis Bazemore, attended the school board meeting to request her son's former jersey be retired in recognition of his making it to the National Basketball Association (NBA). Bazemore started his NBA career last month.

The school board was at a consensus that would be a great gesture.

A ceremony will take place at a later date to retire Bazemore's jersey when he is able to attend.

School board member Rickey Freeman suggested retiring the jerseys of other BHS graduates who play or have played in a professional American sports league. Freeman said cur-



BARRY WARD/Bertie Ledger-Advance

Kent Bazemore speaks to a Bertie County Schools Convocation in August of this year. Bazemore has been drafted to play for the Golden State Warriors Basketball team.

rently BHS alumni Jessica Breland plays for the Minnesota Lynx in the WNBA. He said there are people who graduated from BHS dating back to the 1970s who have played professional basketball or football.

Also during the meeting, the school board gave a heartfelt farewell to Bertie County Board of Education Chair Gloria Lee.

Nov. 5 was Lee's last regularly scheduled meet-

ing as a board member.

Lee decided not to seek another term on the school board.

"I want to thank the board of education members for working with me so nicely," said Lee. "It's been a pleasure."

The board gave Lee a plaque in recognition of her 10 years on the board and a bouquet of flowers. She served as board chair for the last two years. □