

OUR TOWN THEATRE

Celebrating Community Through the Arts

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unless otherwise noted



Our Town Theatre
121 E. Center Street, Oakland, MD 21550
Inset: Our Town Theatre founder, Jane Avery

After its earlier uses as a church hall, an armory, and a museum, an unassuming red brick building on Center Street in Oakland, Maryland, now houses Our Town Theatre, a community theater that presents popular play readings and fully staged plays, musical performances, and open mic nights (without microphones because of the excellent acoustic quality of the hall) throughout the year.

This group resulted from the vision of the late Jane Avery (1947-2016), who summered in Garrett County as a child and who moved here as a young adult, teaching children of all ages, but known mostly for her English and theater classes at Southern High School. When Jane decided

to conduct research on community theaters around the country, she did it in her own fashion, taking an extensive road trip with her friend Maxie the Wonder Dog.

Jane had already collaborated with other arts organizations in Garrett County. Through her experience with other local theaters around the United States, she developed an appreciation for the significant role that performing arts groups play in the community. In addition to providing entertainment, Our Town Theatre addresses through performance such issues as domestic violence, bullying, and the sense of being alone that can arise when people confront serious illness. This has led to partnerships with various

groups, including Community Action (seeking to alleviate the burdens of poverty) and the Dove Center (helping those who have experienced domestic violence), as well as with students and area residents of all ages.

Jane admired the Roadside Theatre, a small community theater in Whitesburg, Kentucky, that had enormous success writing about Whitesburg and about other communities it visited. When Jane inquired about the cost of bringing this group to Garrett County, the director suggested she should use their model and do it herself. Her first venture in writing about the people of Garrett County focused on Kitzmiller. Jane persuaded writer Barbara Hurd to engage her Frostburg State University students in this project. They talked with residents of Kitzmiller and created monologues that describe the lives of townspeople. The pieces were performed in Kitzmiller and at Garrett Community College in 1996.

Later, Jane assigned her own students to conduct research projects on figures from Garrett County's history. Students had to choose someone who had lived in Garrett County, contributed to the community, and died more than forty years ago. This effort became *Keepsakes*, a series of pieces about past notables, including Meshach Browning and Priscilla Drane. The fourteen "dear, young, terrified kids," as Jane introduced them, presented their works as the inaugural performance at Our Town Theatre.

It was Jane who found a permanent home for the theater. She used a family bequest and gifts from generous donors to purchase the building; she baked and sold cookies to fund necessities. All sorts of fundraisers have been launched, often with the help of artists like musician Caleb Stine and his group the Brakemen, and actor Stephen Lang, who presented an evening of poetry recitations called "Lang, Alone."

Over the years, Jane strove to make the theater accessible to everyone. She kept the prices low, and she instituted a Barter Camp, where children can come to summer theater camp in exchange for supplies such as paper towels. An ADA compliant entrance ramp and restroom have been installed. The building itself has been maintained and improved; it is now a versatile and comfortable space for various events such as coffeehouses, cafes, workshops, recitals, and meetings, in addition to the season's performances.

The lifeblood and major mission of Our Town Theatre remains theatrical performance. Because the theater was named for the famous Thornton Wilder play *Our Town*, the subject of Jane's master's thesis, the play is performed every ten years; it will next appear in 2020. Other offerings have included Jane's own work, *Ghost Walks*, and other pieces based on local history; family and community oriented pieces such as the Sanders Family plays and *Quilters*; plays that challenge assumptions such as *Twilight of the Golds*; beloved favorites such as *The Importance of Being Earnest*; and works of local students and playwrights, including



PHOTOS COURTESY OUR TOWN THEATRE



Scenes from two 2018 Our Town Theatre plays: *Silent Sky* (top and bottom right) and *The Dining Room* (bottom left).

recent readings of plays by A.J. De Lauder and Barry Weinberg. The first "main stage" show performed in 1998 at Our Town Theatre was *The Dining Room*. This play was offered again in 2018, with some of the same cast members, during the celebration of the theater's twentieth anniversary.

In 2001, the board began planning for a space that would allow them to more easily create and store sets, props, and costumes. To this end, they purchased a nearby property

and constructed a building that would meet their needs. Today, The Backstage — containing the costume, scene, and prop shops — is open to the public a few hours most Wednesdays. The staff will help you rent a costume at the bargain rate of \$5 for two weeks.

Near the Backstage building is the Peter Pan Garden, with a memorial wall, planned by Jane Avery to honor the young people of Garrett County who passed away “before their time.” This seems especially appropriate for a theater named after a play that examines life from the point of view of a young person who died much too soon.

From the beginning, the theater has been the work of many individuals, and since Jane Avery’s death, dedicated members of the group have continued the mission to be a cornerstone of the community. Artistic Director Mikey Virts, President Emily Elmlinger, Vice President Liz Gilbert, and others have ably led the effort to celebrate Our Town Theatre’s twentieth anniversary. A review of the activities of these years confirms that thousands of people have participated as actors, workers, and audience members. Mikey Virts observes that “magic happens here.” Emily Elmlinger adds, “Lives have been transformed by this place.”

In July 2018, a gala, complete with a New Orleans style musical funeral procession, was held to rejoice at the burning of the mortgage on the Backstage building. August saw another set of young campers bartering for some theater experience, led by Jennifer Virts, Garrett County’s Teacher of the Year. Open Mic nights have continued on the third Thursday of each month when no play rehearsals are in progress.

New projects are underway for the fall. Look for readings of new works; a collection of perspectives on cancer called *Reclaiming Voices*; the premier of a play written by school children in Williamsburg, Virginia; a musical, *She Loves Me*; Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*; and other offerings.

This local gem is run entirely by volunteers, and new hands are always welcome. If you can, give some time to tend the garden, serve on the board, lend a hand with sewing or building, or work with publicity or book-keeping. Or make a financial gift. Of course, the most important thing to any theater is its audience, so check the website to see what theatrical treats are in store, and plan to attend.



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<https://www.ourtowntheatre.org>

(a new website recently redesigned by CurlyRed Inc.)