

# *On with the Show!* at the Washington County Playhouse Dinner Theater & Children's Theater

Written by: **Sara Mullins**

*"It is not in the stars to hold our destiny  
but in ourselves."* — William Shakespeare

Owning and operating a dinner theater is an ambitious undertaking, especially for a couple of newlyweds, but actors Shawn and Laura Martin of Hagerstown, MD, rose to the challenge in 2015 when they became owners of Hagerstown's Washington County Playhouse Dinner Theater & Children's Theater. Now beginning their third season as owners, the Martins are celebrating the iconic theater's 33rd continuous season, highlighting classic musicals, comedies, and Saturday matinees for children, along with occasional musical reviews, dramas and contemporary works.

Serendipity, good timing, and a lot of pluck allowed the Martins to realize their shared dream of owning and operating a dinner theater. Laura had recently retired from teaching at a private school to pursue freelance opportunities. Since 1995, Shawn had worn several hats as cook, actor and director at the Playhouse while working a full-time job. The Playhouse was the setting for their first encounter during a rehearsal when Laura showed up to help a friend with makeup. Both active in local theater, the couple discovered a shared passion. The stars aligned after they received a private Facebook message from the Playhouse owners, who were ready to retire and looking for someone in the local theater community who would continue the Playhouse tradition. The Martins were ready for the challenge.

From their own involvement with the area's theater scene, they knew they could find assistance within a community of kindred spirits. "There's an immense amount of talent in the region, among actors and technicians," Laura says. "We draw people living within about an hour's drive – from Maryland, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Virginia and D.C. Theater groups in the area have formed their own alliance. We meet to share ideas and resources like sets and props, which are costly. We live in an area where no man is an island. We share the same audience."



PHOTO BY LANCE C. BELL

**Laura and Shawn Martin, actors/owners/operators of the Washington County Playhouse Dinner Theater & Children's Theater.**

A location within a supportive community with a long-standing commitment to the arts has been a critical factor as well. "Washington County is blessed with advocates for the arts," Laura says. She serves on the Hagerstown Arts & Entertainment District Management Board and the Playhouse also receives support from the Washington County Arts Council.

Currently the Playhouse has about 200 season ticket holders. "Our subscribers are like extended family," Laura says. Each season features six shows. Season tickets with discounted rates are only available during the final three productions of a season. Individual tickets can be



A sampling of previous productions at the Washington County Playhouse Dinner Theater & Children's Theater — Mel Brooks' *The Producers*, 2017 (top); *The King & I*, 2015 (right); and Theatre for Young Audiences, *Cinderella*, 2015 (bottom right).

Photos by ADAM BLACKSTOCK.



purchased by telephone. Children must be five or older to attend Mainstage productions.

For adults, a Playhouse show offers a relaxing option for a date night or outing with friends or family. Patrons can enjoy a meal plus a show within an intimate setting without the worry of having to go from one venue to another. All food is prepared in-house, with Shawn acting as menu planner and head chef. Mainstage shows and select matinees include meals served buffet-style before performances, featuring a 20-item cold salad bar, hot buffet selections, rolls, and dessert. For adults of legal age, drinks from a full bar are available separately. Children's Saturday productions are open to children three and up, and include lunches featuring pizza or hot dogs with chips. Beverages are available separately.

As a former teacher with a focus in theater education, Laura is passionate about offering children opportunities to become involved in the theater arts, including acting and all aspects of production. "One of our lighting designers

is 14 years old,” she says, highlighting the importance of theater technician as a viable career path. “This is where the money is,” she says. “It’s often a more reliable income source than acting.”

During the summer, Laura offers a summer theater academy. “Every year, we get a parent who tells us that their child is a different sort of kid, and we tell them that child is probably a ‘theater kid.’ It takes a special person to be a thespian. We watch these kids follow their passion, says Laura.” A certified instructor of Hatha Yoga, Laura incorporates yoga into the summer academy curriculum to help children gain better body awareness. “The body is an instrument,” she says.

Laura’s five-year plan includes developing an after-school program in theater for area schools. “We’re interested in working with talented youth, and giving them a place to go after school. We want to develop their talents and give them opportunities. They gain life skills and confidence and think, ‘Hey, that’s another thing I can do!’”

With a strong legacy of community support, a plentiful pool of acting and technical talent available, and a growing audience of all ages, the Playhouse future looks bright under the Martins’ management. Laura is excited to see others share her and Shawn’s passion for theater. “We knew this was going to be a family business, but we didn’t realize how big our family was going to become!”

For more information, visit the website at

[www.washingtoncountyplayhouse.com](http://www.washingtoncountyplayhouse.com)

or call 301-739-7469.

A variety of six different shows are featured each season; enjoy one show or all six plus a meal within an intimate setting.

*The Marvelous Wonderettes*, 2015 (top); Theatre for Young Audiences, *Cinderella*, 2015 (above left); *Perfect Wedding*, 2016 (above right); and *Deathtrap*, 2016 (bottom).

Photos by ADAM BLACKSTOCK.

