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—Contributor.....Annie Landenberger
—Contributor email.....verbatimvt@gmail.com
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Notes from editor (not for publication):

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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The best of Broadway, close to home

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Rock River Players presents its Summer Musical Theater

Revue

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TEXT BODY:

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Rock River Players (RRP) continues its Summer Musical Theater Revue — billed as a “Best of Broadway Experience” — this weekend in Williamsville.

With selected songs from the Broadway canon, from timeless classics to contemporary gems, the show is a tightly-wrapped evening of lightly staged performances designed,

11 according to director Walter Cramer, “to showcase the music and
12 the exceptional talent of local performers.”

13 The American musical has a knack for cutting to an
14 emotional core while honing microfocus on what it is to be
15 vulnerable, brilliant, crazy, troubled, naïve, ebullient ... alive. The
16 RRP’s well-curated and balanced collection taps that knack,
17 sending us through the gauntlet from silly to poignant, from
18 innocent to heart-wrenching.

19 “I proposed such an evening of musical theater songs to
20 fill a [perceived] gap in local theater” offerings, Cramer said.

21 “Of the many community theaters in our midst, only two
22 regularly produce full musicals,” said Cramer, because “they’re
23 expensive, with licensing, sets, costumes, musicians’ fees; they
24 require extensive rehearsals for the book, the music, and
25 choreography, and they’re typically more [technically complex]”

26 And so, Cramer, who’s performed in various RRP
27 productions and has been a mainstay in its winter cabarets for
28 several years, cooked up this summer fare.

29 “My experience with similar programs as an
30 undergraduate, as a staff member at a special residential
31 community at Indiana University, and with a [Friends of Music at
32 Guilford] production, among others — and the positive reception
33 these received — gave me the confidence that this could be
34 successful here,” he said.

35 Cramer, who quips that his wife “accuses me of living in
36 a musical,” was first on stage in kindergarten.

37 “I sang ‘Hound Dog,’” he says. “Can you believe that?”

38 First smitten with musicals in high school outside
39 Lancaster, Pennsylvania, he recalls that “we didn’t do the classic
40 *Oklahoma* and *The Sound of Music*.” They did shows more on
41 the fringe such as *Fiorello!*, *The Student Prince*, and *Around the*
42 *World in 80 Days*.”

43 With “terrific” theater and music teachers, Cramer had
44 the chance to be in musicals at a local Actors’ Equity house, a

45 summer stock theater where he did six shows as a teen before
46 moving on to University of Pittsburgh.

47 There he majored in music, in “a tiny department with
48 really great teachers” who gave him a lot of latitude and trust to
49 create on stages.

50 For the Summer Musical Theater Revue, Cramer has
51 staged each number, from solo to ensemble. He and his producer
52 and assistant, Amy Donahue, have co-created an interlocking
53 script to set the stage — and context — for each number in the
54 two-act production.

55 The staging is varied and innovative throughout, with
56 numbers popping up beyond the stage area in a few positions in
57 the Williamsville Hall.

58 “I love this space,” Cramer adds. “The best musicals I’ve
59 done have actually been in smaller, nontraditional spaces.”

60 Referencing how the playing areas were configured for
61 Patrick Keppel’s *The Freeing of Mollie Steimer* last summer,
62 Cramer observed that “you can use this space in so many ways.”

63 **Thoughts from the cast**

64 Susan Boyd Joyce joined the Rock River Players to
65 appear in the 2024 production of *Steel Magnolias* and has been
66 in several productions since.

67 “I always wanted to be an actress, but I’m not blonde,
68 and I’m not tall, and my teeth weren’t straight,” she says.

69 She first fell in love with musical theater when growing
70 up in New Jersey, where her father, a pianist, played for
71 community musicals such as *Guys and Dolls*, *The Boy Friend*,
72 and *Little Mary Sunshine* — “all the old chestnuts.”

73 “It was wonderful, so that’s what I grew up loving,” Boyd
74 Joyce says.

75 After a brief stint at Boston University, “I moved to New
76 York and flopped in a play; I stuck around for a while,
77 auditioned, and got in the chorus of *Jesus Christ Superstar*,” she
78 continues.

79 “Then I landed in L.A., met the wrong guy, stayed in L.A.
80 for all the wrong reasons, and I thought, ‘All right, here I am, [in]
81 the Big Orange, you know, and so I did some TV acting.”

82 She was Fonzie’s girlfriend for four episodes of *Happy*
83 *Days* in 1975 and 1976. “But I’d always be second banana,” she
84 says.

85 So Boyd Joyce “started singing, and people started hiring
86 me.” That shift launched a 35-year career as a professional doing
87 backup singing, commercials, movies, records. “The phone rang;
88 you went,” she says. “It was like playing in a sandbox and getting
89 paid on a union scale.”

90 Jeff Seabaugh, known to RRP cabaretgoers and from his
91 performances in the RRP’s *The Freeing of Mollie Steimer*, spent
92 many years in New York theater before moving to Vermont, where
93 he directs theater and chorus at Thetford Academy.

94 Seabaugh says that after appearing in his first musical at
95 age 12, “I was hooked.”

96 He continued performing through college, and then in
97 New York and in summer stock in Maine while he was earning a
98 BFA in acting from University of Memphis in Tennessee.

99 When asked what drew him to the RRP production, he
100 explains, “I had such a positive experience last summer doing
101 *Mollie Steimer* and I love the people, so I thought it would be a
102 nice thing [to do this] summer. I also think it’s important for me as
103 a teacher to practice what I preach and get back on stage any
104 chance I can.”

105 He and his husband, Randy Lichtenwalner, have been in
106 Vermont for five years. Lichtenwalner discovered RRP first, “and I
107 saw all the fun that he was having,” Seabaugh says. “I’m so glad I
108 got involved.”

109 Addie Mahdavi, a Newfane native, is an alumna of the
110 Grammar School and New England Youth Theatre, where she
111 played in several musicals.

112 With the Leland & Gray Players, she was seen first as an
113 elementary school ensemble member in *The Wizard of Oz* and

114 *Oliver* and later in high school with leads in, among other shows,
115 *The Drowsy Chaperone*, in which she calls her portrayal of Janet
116 Van De Graaff “the role of a lifetime” (and, Mahdavi adds, “the
117 costume changes of a lifetime”).

118 A founding member of the Rock River Players, having
119 first joined to play Emily Webb in RRP’s inaugural production,
120 *Our Town*, Mahdavi went on to direct *Justice? Just Us* and to play
121 a lead in *Twelve Angry Jurors*. Later this summer, we’ll see her in
122 Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal*, directed by her father, RRP’s Bahman
123 Mahdavi.

124 When asked what drew her to this production, she says
125 she’d “fallen in love with ‘Still Hurting’ from *The Last Five Years*”
126 when she first heard it several years ago.

127 A while back, she recalls, she was driving from her home
128 in New York City “and I just had this fantasy of how great it’d be
129 to get to sing that song at the Williamsville Hall. It’s a beautiful
130 song, and this is a place that I performed in for such a long time.

131 “I happened to be in town when Walter was doing
132 auditions,” she explains, adding “it was quite impulsive, but it
133 seemed too good to pass up.”

134 Now head of publishing at Echo Point Books and Media
135 of Brattleboro, Mahdavi still works remotely from New York City,
136 where she’s been living since late 2018.

137 “I’ve been very lucky to get to travel a lot around the
138 world and spend a lot of time up here,” she says. “My parents are
139 in Newfane where my mom grew up and my brother is right next
140 door to the Hall.”

141 Mahdavi did some acting while a student at Middlebury
142 College, but she says her singing experience there was
143 disappointing. Nonetheless, that experience compelled her to
144 reinforce her connection with music as “something that really
145 feeds me and allows me to connect with the people I’m
146 performing with. That’s first and foremost for me — the people
147 that I’m doing it with.”

148 Mahdavi adds that Rock River Players is “just my
149 community theater. Even though I don’t live here anymore, even
150 if I stay in New York for the rest of my life, it’s always going to be
151 my community.”

152 In addition to heading a popular band and being a
153 sought-after band member, music director Dan DeWalt has been
154 involved in many area musical events over the years from
155 accompanying silent movies with his own scores to coaching and
156 accompanying for musical productions at Leland & Gray to being
157 the one-man band for Rock River Players’ annual cabarets.

158 Of this production, he says, “musical theater, for me, for
159 the people singing, quite often is an art form. For me it’s
160 business,” too, though. “My job is to make them sound good, do
161 everything right. So it’s a nice challenging job.”

162 With a company rounded out by Jonathan Benney,
163 Addison Rice, Sea Rios, Laura Stickle, Gwyneth Thomson, and
164 Marilyn Tullgren, the RRP program includes a diverse repertoire
165 from legendary composers, Leonard Bernstein, Lin-Manuel
166 Miranda, Jonathan Larson, among them.

167 Featured numbers are from popular shows such as *West*
168 *Side Story*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, and *Company*, and some lesser-
169 known such as *Destry Rides Again* and *Finding Neverland*.

170 The evening closes with a tonic for these times: “Being
171 Alive” from Stephen Sondheim’s *Company*: “Someone to crowd
172 you with love / Someone to force you to care / Someone to make
173 you come through / Who’ll always be there [....]”

174 In addition to the nuanced, skillful staging, both the
175 lighting by technical director Jess Guerrero and the set
176 design/decoration of this production create fitting and effective
177 locales for each of the 21 numbers in the lineup.

178 * * *

179 *Remaining performances are at 7:30 p.m. on Friday and*
180 *Saturday, July 24 and 25 and at 2 p.m. on Sunday, July 26. Tickets*
181 *are available at the door or online in advance at*

182 rockriverplayers.org. Williamsville Hall is located on 35 Dover
183 Rd., in Williamsville, and is accessible and air conditioned.

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BIO/COATTAIL:

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184 **ANNIE LANDENBERGER** is an arts writer and columnist
185 for *The Commons*. She also is one half of the musical duo Bard
186 Owl, with partner T. Breeze Verdant, and she is the founder of
187 Rock River Players.

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