

Building a Theatre from the Ground Up

The NorthEast Shakespeare Ensemble brings Shakespeare and other classics to the area

BY John Walters

Want to try something really hard? Compete in a triathlon, climb a high mountain or swim the English Channel?

How about creating a new theatre company? There are few challenges that take as much brains, talent, dedication — and more than a pinch of luck.

“In the beginning I was thinking it wouldn’t be that difficult,” says John Goodlin. “It has been more difficult than I thought.” Goodlin is a veteran actor who makes his home in New London; he’s the founder and artistic director of the NorthEast Shakespeare Ensemble (NESE), a young company that’s trying to carve out a niche in the region’s theatre market.

Just the classics

Goodlin is a tall, energetic man, who calls to mind a lanky version of the actor Robert Duvall. There’s a bit of a continental edge to his voice — a testament to his years in classic theatre, not his childhood in the heartland states of Tennessee and Kansas.

He brings his brand new company into a crowded marketplace. There’s the Barn Theatre in New London with its 50-plus years of history; and Northern Stage, among others, in the Upper Valley. Goodlin cites two key differences between NESE and others: The actors and the repertoire.

In terms of actors, most area companies depend heavily on local talent and younger actors. NESE aims for a full relationship with Actors Equity. “It’s the union of actors,” says NESE board

member Morris Edwards.

“Membership includes all the top actors. It’s a certification of quality — equity actors have earned their stripes.”

And while other local companies focus on mainstream fare, “our vision is to bring Shakespeare and other classics that have stood the test of time,” says Edwards.

Goodlin adds, “Shakespeare is the centerpiece of that.

Moliere, Ibsen, Chekhov, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller — you know it when you see it.”

Put it all together, and you get a vision for a new theatre along the lines of great regional companies like the Oregon Shakespeare Festival or the Stratford Festival in Canada.

NESE’s inaugural production in 2004 was the Shakespearean comedy “Twelfth Night” starring Karen Lynn Gorney, the actress who played John Travolta’s love interest in “Saturday Night Fever.” Last year, Goodlin starred in “The Gin Game,” which was made famous by Hume Cronyn and



Cesario/Viola (Terry Stoecker) and Orsino (Daniel Sherman) in “Twelfth Night”

Jessica Tandy. And NESE hosted a touring company’s performance of “Much Ado About Nothing.” This season, NESE will tackle “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” in what Goodlin calls a “pivotal” season for his young company.

The making of an actor

Goodlin caught the theatre bug as a young man, when he was teaching an adult education class in Olathe, Kan. One of his students turned out to be a former actor, who was impressed by Goodlin’s recital of Shakespeare for the class. “He was on the board of a community theatre, and suggested I try out,”

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Goodlin recalls. “I got the role of Bob in [the Jean Kerr play] ‘Mary, Mary.’ ”

He’s been treading the boards ever since — mainly in regional companies, including the Georgia and Virginia Shakespeare Festivals, and four years at Stratford. He had spent many summers in the New London area; it became his permanent home about six years ago when his wife Patricia took a job with Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center.

Goodlin is fully immersed in preparations for this year’s production, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” which he will direct at the Lebanon Opera House.

Shortly after the move, Goodlin started looking for things to do. “I directed a performance of ‘Much Ado About Nothing’ at Colby-Sawyer College,” he recalls, “and that became the genesis of this company. We developed a small board of directors and became incorporated. And the money came trickling in.”

Goodlin and friends tried to spur interest through a series of “salons.”

Think of them as a sort of focus group: Gathering potential supporters for short readings of Shakespeare, and light refreshments. The salons generated excitement and support, but it remained slow going on the financial front.

If funding was a challenge, so was finding a home base. There were some contacts with Colby-Sawyer, but no agreement. NESE’s first play was staged at Proctor Academy in Andover, but “we discovered that we had to share the

theatre with the Gordon Research Conference in the summer,” says Goodlin. “That would not have given us the opportunity to grow.”

Last year, “The Gin Game” was produced at the New London Town Hall — not your typical theatre space, although Goodlin says it worked out surprisingly well: “We got great feedback; sales were fair to good. And the police department let us use their

locker rooms as dressing rooms.”

The traveling company performances of “Much Ado About Nothing” were staged in Concord, Newport and Lebanon. “We started off focusing on the Lake Sunapee/New London area,” says Edwards, “but we recognized that we’d have to grow beyond that.”

Goodlin says NESE plans to make the Lebanon Opera House its primary home: “We’ll have full control of the theatre space. It also gives us the opportunity to tie into the Upper Valley, with a bigger potential market.” NESE will still be based in New London, and Goodlin hopes to stage another play this year in the Town Hall — and perhaps make it a home for smaller ensemble productions.

Coming attractions

Goodlin is fully immersed in preparations for this year’s production, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” which he will direct. The play is a mixed blessing: “It’s a great play, but is so often performed. That creates a big challenge; it has to be good and unique, but it also has to be Shakespeare.” Goodlin doesn’t want to spill too many secrets just yet — although he hints of a Eurasian/Indian flavor.

In the future, Goodlin hopes to produce at least two plays per season, and work toward a full contractual agreement with Actors Equity. That will be a slow building process; for now, NESE is using Equity players for major roles and filling in with local talent. Goodlin has lofty goals, and he’s fully aware of the work that lies ahead. But if he succeeds, he will give the region a valuable new resource for top quality entertainment. **K**

John Walters is a freelance writer; his articles have appeared in numerous magazines and newspapers in the area. He is a former host and anchor at New Hampshire Public Radio. He lives in Elkins with his wife, two rabbits, two cockatiels and too many zebra finches.



Fonsia Dorsey (Kathleen Huber) and Weller Martin (John Goodlin) in “The Gin Game”