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## Summer theater festival heats up the stage

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Ashland's own Whistle Stop Theatre Company will host its first annual Ashland Summer Theatre Festival Aug. 13. The festival features theatrical productions whose scripts were written by Whistle Stop's artistic director and award-winning playwright, Louise Ricks.

The three productions that will be performed at this year's festival are modern adaptations of classic stories, including "Beauty and the Beast Tamer," "Peter Pan: When Wendy Grew Up" and "Alice in Wonderland."

"None of these shows will be Disney, but Disney wasn't the original stories either," Ricks said. "I'm trying to take the original stories and make them relevant for audiences today."

"*Beauty and the Beast Tamer*" follows a plotline similar to the original "*Beauty and the Beast*" story, but in the context of a 20th century circus.

"We wanted to bring out the best parts of the stories that have lasted for eons and introduce them to a whole new generation," Ricks said.

Ricks explained her script for "*Peter Pan: When Wendy Grew Up*" as the next chapter where the original story left off, when Peter Pan took Wendy's daughter to Neverland. For her rendition of "*Alice in Wonderland*," Ricks said that she chose to write the script with a focus on the poetic language used in the original story.

The performances run about 30 minutes each, and are intended for all age groups. Each production will be performed three times during the day, at noon, 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. This allows viewers to attend each of these half hour-long productions throughout the day, choosing which order to watch the performances before walking to the next.

"We set up the locations so families could walk from one location to the next," Ricks said. *Beauty and the Beast Tamer* will be performed at the Hanover Arts and Activities Center. *Peter Pan* and "*Alice in Wonderland*" will be held at Ashland Coffee & Tea and the Ashland Theatre, respectively.

Local businesses are also joining in on the spirit of the festival. According to Ricks, the Ashland Sweet Frog will have special flavors on the day of the festival, such as 'White Rabbit,' to commemorate characters from the classic stories. Ricks also mentioned that Newfound Gathering Place is hosting a Mad Hatter tea party during the day.

"We're trying to make it something that isn't just about the theatre but about the town coming together and showing off how much fun you can have in one day in Ashland," Ricks said.

Ricks moved to Ashland when she was in middle school, graduating from Patrick Henry High School before going on to earn her Bachelors of Fine Arts degree in Theatre for Youth at the Shenandoah Conservatory. She has performed with companies such as Jean's Playhouse in Lincoln, New Hampshire, and has traveled around the country with companies like the Theatre IV children's theatre group. She not only has a passion for performing, but for writing and directing her own productions.

"I want to bring whatever talents I have to Ashland and support the community," Ricks said.

According to their website, Whistle Stop Theatre Company formed in 2013, and has produced several original productions. Ricks writes all of the plays and directs many of the productions. Her mother is the managing director of the company, and her father is the technical director.

"We spend a week rehearsing, just one week, and put it on up. Everybody really has to come together with their lines memorized and ready to go, and it's just a whirlwind," Ricks said. "That's why we called it 'Whistle Stop', you hop off the train, you get what you need, and you get right back on."

One of the company's most notable productions, "*Cinderella: The Fairy Godmother's Tale*" was accepted among only a handful of original productions to the New York Children's Theater Festival.

Ricks estimated that the performers' ages range from the youngest actor being about 10 years old, to adult actors in their 40s.

"Our goal is to really bring professional artists, first and foremost, and introduce younger artists to a professional theatrical production," Ricks said.

"We really just want to focus on bringing good, quality theater to Ashland," Ricks said.

Tickets for the festival begin at \$5 for a single ticket to one performance, \$10 for one viewer to attend all three shows, and \$25 for family passes to each show.

***Natalie Miller can be reached at [hpreporter@lcs.net](mailto:hpreporter@lcs.net)***

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