

Broadway actress choreographs 'Brigadoon' at Richter

Tuesday, July 3, 2012

Danbury News-Times



*Danbury resident Jeri Kansas, a Broadway veteran who also teaches dance locally is choreographer of "Brigadoon."
Photo: Contributed Photo / CT*

DANBURY -- Theater fans familiar with local Broadway veteran Jeri Kansas' career, which traverses from Radio City Music Hall to Hollywood to Candlewood Playhouse, know that she personifies tap dance.

Kansas, after all, kept those dancing feet busy for eight years in Broadway's original production of "42nd Street."

Lately she's been busy with a new project -- choreographing Musicals at Richter's current production of the Lerner and Loewe classic, "Brigadoon." The outdoor show runs Thursday through July 21 in Danbury.

While "Brigadoon" ranks high in the pantheon of musical comedy, it's definitively not a tap show. So why would Kansas want to sign on as director of choreography?

"What interests me most about choreographing 'Brigadoon' is the fact that it's not a tap musical," said Kansas, during a break from rehearsals. "This gives me the opportunity to create dance numbers I would not normally be asked to do."

Kansas, who grew up in Union City, N.J., started dancing about two weeks after learning to walk. She has accrued much experience in other useful styles of dance that qualify her for her "Brigadoon" gig.

Since kicking her heels up with Radio City Music Hall's Rockettes at 19, she's been in a wide range of musicals, including "Chicago," "The Music Man" and "Show Boat." With "Brigadoon," she employs ballet, modern, Scottish reels and traditional musical theater steps, with dozens of performers ranging in age from young kids to some old enough to be their youthful grandparents.

Kansas said there were two other reasons she eagerly accepted this job. First, "Brigadoon" is a rare musical warhorse that she's never worked on before.

"I remembered seeing the film with Gene Kelly and Cyd Charisse, with whom I had the pleasure of working years earlier," said the Danbury resident.

Then, there's the show's unfettered sense of romance, where love overcomes all obstacles, even time. "Today's audience will find 'Brigadoon' enchanting," she said.

"Brigadoon," a family favorite since opening on Broadway in 1947, is set in a Scottish Shangri La, amongst a utopic village unaffected by time. Two jaded New Yorkers, Tommy Albright (Sherman's Nathan Mandracchia) and Jeff Douglas (Brookfield's Ted Schwartz) stumble upon this mystical place while on a hunting vacation. They discover a pocket of the world where time stands still and the beautiful lassies can't. Tommy and Fiona MacClaren (Caitlin Mandracchia of Sherman) fall in love with each other and the relatively forward Meg Brockie (Dianna Waller of Brewster, N.Y.) falls hard for Jeff -- harder, that is, than she does for the rest of the young men in town.

Director Donald E. Birely fills Musicals at Richter's outdoor stage with 50 local performers in all. While some of them have professional acting credits, the cast is, by and large, composed of non-professionals. Kansas, who has taught local dancers in area schools, adjusts easily to working with less-experienced performers in productions such as "Brigadoon."

"When I work with a cast that does not have as much experience as a professional, I want to be sure their experience is a positive one," said Kansas, who currently teaches dance at Just Dance School of Performing Arts in Danbury.

"I want them to come away with a feeling of accomplishment..." she said. "I always thank my dancers for their time and energy. They are not there for a paycheck and I want them to know I appreciate and respect the time they have given to be at rehearsals."

Main stage performances for "Brigadoon" are Friday through Sunday evenings at the Richter Arts Center (next to the Richter Park Golf Course, Interstate 84, Exit 2), 100 Aunt Hack Road, in Danbury. Tickets are \$23 for adults, \$18 for seniors, and \$15 for students and children, with reduced rates available on Sunday, July 8 and 15. All tickets for the Thursday, July 5 preview are \$10. Ticket reservations may be made by phone and through the Musicals at Richter website. Grounds open at 7:15 p.m. for picnicking, with curtain at 8:30 p.m. Group rates are available with advance reservation; chair rentals and soft drink/snack concessions are available on site.

Visit www.musicalsatrichter.org, leave a message at 203-748-6873 or email info@musicalsatrichter.org.