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See you at the theater

Lost Nation Theater celebrates 30 years

By Carrie Chandler
Special to the *Vermont Guardian*

As Montpelier's Lost Nation Theater begins its 30th season, the city has much to celebrate. Bill Fraser, Montpelier's city manager, called the theater "the visual center for the city and a symbol for the whole arts community in Montpelier" and credits it with beginning the influx of the arts into the city with its move there in 1985.

Lost Nation Theater's (LNT) journey began in 1977, when Kim Bent, its founder and artistic director, came back to his home state of Vermont after attending college with the dream of starting his own theater and living in the place that he loved.

"I didn't want to put myself through the horrors of auditioning," he said, so starting the theater seemed like a good way to use his passion. Bent found a little spot in Bristol, above the pizza shop, and it all began.

"We primarily toured children's shows around Vermont and would tour experimental pieces as well," he said. For the first six years, the company focused on producing original shows. "It was a labor of love," he said, while he worked on the side as a carpenter.

Bent left the state again to attend graduate school in Long Island, but came back in 1985 and settled Lost Nation in Montpelier because it was "a central place in the state, where we could travel anywhere we wanted."

During their first years in Montpelier, the company traveled with shows such as *Waiting for Godot*, a play that deals with the hopelessness of life; *As Is*, one of the first plays to highlight the AIDS epidemic; and *Still Life*, which touched on Vietnam War veterans' domestic issues. "We would do plays that had a really strong resonance with what was happening in the country," said Bent. In 1989, LNT began doing summer theater in Montpelier's City Hall after another theater company moved to Burlington. "We transitioned to being Montpelier's resident company," he said, noting that "a majority of the theater's time has been devoted to Montpelier."

Throughout LNT's evolution "it has always been about doing theater on the frontier," said Bent. "What we have been able to accomplish in Montpelier has been inspirational for others in the state." For example, the theater in Stowe is an example of LNT's leadership. "We are an arts organization and a municipal collaboration that has worked really well for a number of years," said Bent.

Not only does it serve as an example for others, the theater company also brings in revenue for the city.

"It helps make Montpelier a destination" said Mark Roberts, an actor with the company, and local businesses benefit from the 120 performances that the company stages each season.

"People come to the theater and make an evening of it. They will go to dinner and may do something after the show," said Fraser.

"If it weren't for the small theaters, many towns throughout the



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country would be just another small town,” said Bent, and for a small theater to succeed, it must carve out a niche in the local community. LNT does this by “creating work that is specific to the community and comes out of the community,” said Bent, such as *Stone*, which highlights the granite heritage of Vermont, and *Judevine*, by poet David Budbill. “Larger theaters can do the classics, they can do whatever they want, but we have to find a way to do theater that really connects to the people we do theater for,” he stated.

Each season consists of six plays, and LNT “takes an eclectic approach to programming because we are trying to serve a diverse community” said Bent. The theater prides itself on including a debut of an original, individual work each year.

This year’s anniversary season will begin with a reprise of *Judevine* — described as “a tribute to the real Vermont” on the LNT website. The season will also include *Vivien* — a portrayal of the actress Vivien Leigh. The musical offering of the season is *Musical of Musicals: The Musical* — a parody of all the great musicals. The original, debut play



of the season is *The Selfish Giant*, adapted for stage by local actress Mary Wheeler and based on the Oscar Wilde book of the same name. Ending with *Tartuffe* and an annual Shakespeare play (not yet chosen), the theater has a full season.

LNT’s offerings to the community add up to more than just the plays they put on in Montpelier. The company offers conservatory classes for the high school community taught by professionals



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in the theater world. Also for the youth, Lost Nation offers theater labs throughout the year. Partnering with the Head Start program in Central Vermont, artists working with the theater are placed

in classrooms to work with the children on a weekly basis. The company also ventures into middle and high school classrooms to teach “Will on Wheels,” a customizable program about William Shakespeare.

Younger community members are not the only ones to benefit from LNT’s programs. Each summer and fall, the theater offers Elderhostel programs. During the week-long sessions, participants are taught by theater professionals.

But the highlight of having a quality theater in central Vermont is being able to see a quality production in the state’s capitol.

“You are going to be more entertained during the theater than you would in a movie,” said Roberts. “Going to the theater is never as painful as you thought it would be.”

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