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Posted on May 29, 2018 by Jeff Messer

*DRESSED FOR SUCCESS: Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre returns for a full summer of performances in what it's calling a season of reNEWal. First up is 'Don't Dress for Dinner.' The cast includes, from left, Lee Wilson, Randy Noojin, Amanda Ladd and Beverly Todd. Photo by Michaela Hall*

The Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre summer season is a full slate of diverse shows, kicking off with the raucous comedy *Don't Dress For Dinner*, opening Thursday, May 31.

"We wanted to do shows that showcase SART's talents," says SART's board president, Jim Brown. "We also wanted to do shows that were funny, uplifting, engaging and meaningful ... shows that people wanted to see and wanted to produce. *Don't Dress for Dinner* is a great show and enables SART to showcase the comedic talents of our actors."

The play is a farce in which a weekend in the country is turned upside down by mistaken identities, affairs and a crazy cook. The infidelities and fabrications to keep them secret spiral out of control with comical results.

But that show, and the entire upcoming season, almost didn't happen. Last year, after four decades as one of Western North Carolina's more venerable summer theater companies, SART was about to close its curtain for good. Two years of being unable to access Owen Theatre on the Mars Hill University campus, due to the construction of a new theater arts building, had dwindled SART's finances, audience and support base.

Last year would have been the first in the theater's history that no shows were announced — it appeared that SART was closed for good. To many, that just felt wrong. Mars Hill graduate and theater professional Amanda Sayles' personal passions for SART helped save the company. She was a driving force in making sure there were performances under the SART banner in 2017. First, longtime SART veteran Randy Noojin staged his one-man Woody Guthrie show last summer as a fundraiser. Expectations were conservative, so when the company brought in \$28,000, it realized it had supporters.

The success of that show allowed SART to produce *The Sanders Family Christmas* in December, which played to sold-out houses and brought in about 1,000 patrons.

"Out on Highway 19/23 there are two large brown cultural arts signs that read, 'Southern Appalachian Repertory Theatre,'" Sayles says. "The remaining members of the board of directors knew that if they closed SART, those signs would have to come down. It would be a tremendous loss for the town of Mars Hill and Madison County. It would have been a loss for Mars Hill University. This was a loss the SART board was not willing to take."

As summer arrives, SART can boast a full slate of shows and an assembly of classic favorite performers (Amanda Ladd, Beverly Todd and Noojin, to name a few) and a crop of fresh young faces (Lee and Natalie Wilson among them). Offerings include Noojin's *Seeger: A Multimedia Show* about Pete Seeger (opening Thursday, June 21), *Working: The Musical* (Thursday, July 12) and *I-Ya-I-Ya-O*, a world premiere directed by SART founder Jim Thomas (Thursday, Aug. 2).

"With a [44]-year history behind us, it's difficult to say that this is a fresh start," says Brown. "SART will always have that legacy to carry us through to the next venture. My goal is to modernize SART as a committed and fully recognized part of the economic development of Madison County and WNC, and move the level of professionalism and artistic quality beyond what SART has done in the past."

Looking toward the future, the company has secured the exclusive rights to the WNC-set musical *Brightstar* by Edie Brickell and Steve Martin. An all-day bluegrass festival around that production is planned for 2019.

SART is hoping to go year-round, with a calendar that includes a summer season kickoff festival, SCRIPTfest (an annual playwrighting competition and conference) and a Christmas show, Sayles says. And, "we want to introduce a children's theater camp, in addition to a children's theater series."

"To address the issues of affordability, we want to provide locals with the opportunities to see selected performances on a pay-what-you-can rate," Brown says. "We want to reach out to single moms, young families, senior citizens and others to experience what we have to offer. This is all part of the new vision of SART."

WHAT: *Don't Dress for Dinner***WHERE:** Owen Theater, Mars Hill University Campus, 44 College St., [SARTplays.org](#)**WHEN:** May 31-June 17, Thursdays through Saturdays at 7:30 p.m.; matinees Saturdays, June 9 and 16, and Sundays at 2:30 p.m. \$25-30

5816 Views

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About Jeff Messer

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2 thoughts on "SART announces a new season and future plans"**Curious**

May 31, 2018 at 7:37 am

"Amanda Sayles was a former Mars Hill graduate..."

I'm curious as to how she became a former graduate. Once you've graduated, don't you always remain a graduate?

[Log in to Reply](#)**Virginia Daffron**

May 31, 2018 at 10:36 am

Can't argue with you there. Good catch!

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