



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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Shepherdstown? ... Seriously!

Ed Herendeen, Founder
Contemporary American Theater Festival

Ed Herendeen founded the Contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown, West Virginia, in 1991, with the mission to produce and develop new American theater. Since then, the festival has produced 115 new plays, including 43 world premieres and 10 commissions, and has gained a reputation as one of America's most important producers of new work.

Herendeen earned his master's degree in directing from Ohio University, where he was honored with the College of Fine Arts Distinguished Alumni Award. He has worked at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, Missouri Repertory Theatre, Old Globe, Lyceum Theatre and the Williamstown Theatre Festival. He has served as a panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts and on the board of Theatre Communications Group, the national service organization for American theaters.

The Contemporary American Theater Festival has been the recipient of the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts and the Governor's Award for Leadership in the Arts.



Twenty-six years ago, when I announced that I was going to West Virginia to start a professional theater dedicated to new work, my theater friends were in disbelief.

"Shepherdstown?" they asked. "Seriously?"

In fact, our geography, the Eastern Panhandle, plays an important role in our success. Since 1991, Shepherdstown has been an incubator for new American plays. Our ambitious repertory thrives in conditions where few would have expected any arts festival to prosper. The annual theater festival provides our Eastern Panhandle community with a national reputation as a center for supporting established playwrights, discovering emerging new writers and producing some of America's best new plays.

Choosing to live and make theater in Shepherdstown, in partnership with Shepherd University, was the right choice. This unique relationship between an independent, nonprofit, professional theater and a public liberal arts institution of higher education represents the power and impact of collaboration between shared missions and purposes. We're excited to see where the university will go under the direction of Shepherd's brilliant new President, Dr. Mary J.C. Hendrix, who is herself a graduate of the college and a Shepherdstown native.

The festival acts as a cultural gateway to West Virginia, as well as an economic driver. Patrons from 37 states (and several countries) flock to the area for our month-long summer festival. This influx of people, in turn, generates a significant amount of money for the local economy – millions of dollars over the years. It's clear that Shepherdstown is a destination point for new-play enthusiasts. Visitors love German Street and its shops, cafes and restaurants. They love the Eastern Panhandle's hotels and inns and historic sites: Antietam, Harpers Ferry and Charles Town. *They love this place!*

A portion of the Panhandle has even found its way to the big city: CATF's world premiere production of Thomas Gibbons' *Uncanny Valley* transferred to Off-Broadway's 59E59 Theaters in 2014. Lucy Thurber's *The Insurgents* was produced in New York City by The Labyrinth Theater Company just a few months later. In 2015, Jane Martin's *H2O* and Chisa Hutchinson's *Dead and Breathing* enjoyed Off-Broadway runs. Both started as world premieres in Shepherdstown. Other CATF productions have been mounted on Broadway (Lydia R. Diamond's *Stick Fly*), staged regionally (Johnna Adams' *Gidion's Knot*), or adapted for the silver screen (Beau Willimon's *Farragut North* became the motion picture *The Ides of March* featuring George Clooney and Ryan Gosling).



The Marinoff Theater. Photo courtesy Holzman Moss Bottino Architecture

Place matters. We love our geography. We're "the oldest town in West Virginia, doing the newest plays in America." Writing, matters. Producing new American plays, matters. Mentoring and educating the next generation of students and artists, matters.

The Culture Trip rates Shepherdstown one of "the 10 most beautiful towns in West Virginia." *The New York Times* calls CATF "essential" and "intriguing." Germany's *WorldGuide* lists CATF as a "Top 10 Theater Festival not to miss this summer"—an international ranking that mentions Dublin, Salzburg and ... Shepherdstown!



Ted Koch and Jessica Wortham in The Second Girl, by Ronan Noone • Photo by Seth Freeman CATF 2016

Now that the 2016 season is history and we look ahead to 2017 and beyond, I am reminded of the time playwright John Guare (*Six Degrees of Separation*) came to the festival and remarked, "Shepherdstown is where the future of the American Theater spends the summer." The Contemporary American Theater Festival is fortunate to be nestled in the Eastern Panhandle, a region rich in culture, history, and now, the arts.

So ... "Shepherdstown?" Yes! Seriously. ♪



*Margaret Ivey and Jason Babinsky in The Wedding Gift, by Chisa Hutchinson
Photo by Seth Freeman CATF 2016*