

IN *the* SPOTLIGHT



BELEN PIFEL, TUCKER SPARKMAN AND CHARLEY MANN AS TINA, TOM AND TIM IN *PIG FARM*, A DARKLY ROMANTIC COMEDY AT 1ST STAGE IN TYSONS CORNER.

BY BARBARA MACKAY

“I grew up loving those Andy Hardy movies where Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland say, ‘Let’s build a theater!’ and they go down the street picking up wooden crates—then all of a sudden they’re in a Broadway theater,” says Mark Krikstan. “I guess I was a little naïve.”

Naïve or not, Mark has pulled off his Andy Hardyesque dream, becoming the artistic director of 1st Stage, a 110-seat theater in McLean. Last June, he found an abandoned warehouse and, with the help of a group of volunteers, spent the summer demolishing the existing structure and transforming the 6,500-square-foot space into a theater. On September 18, 1st Stage opened its first production.

“We’ve been fortunate,” says Mark. “In the beginning, I went to the architectural firm of Butz Wilbern, who knew my work at Marshall High School where I taught for many years. I just went for advice, but they jumped in and did a beautiful design for the space. They did all the plans for free. We’ve also had help from a contracting firm called M. Raina Associates, who served as general contractors. Altogether, we’ve gotten \$50,000 in contributed services.”

Part of Mark’s desire to create a theater in Tysons Corner has to do with the potential for growth in that part of Northern Virginia. “I knew that there was almost no professional theater in Fairfax County,” he says. “With all this talk about Tysons becoming a city and with the Metro coming in, it seemed it was a choice opportunity to open a theater. If you look down the road five or ten years when a city center will be here, you’re certainly going to need the arts.”

Mark also wanted to create a performance space for the students he had known at Marshall. “Incredibly talented people were graduating, bitten by the theater bug, heading off to college and majoring in drama,” he says.

“I would see them go to New York, struggling in little theaters with tiny audiences. I was keenly aware that all this talent leaves Fairfax County and can’t come back because there’s no home theater to perform in.”

The original financing of the renovation came from Mark himself. “Most of it was my retirement, which I gave as a loan,” he says. “Of course, the timing wasn’t great. We opened on September 18 and the stock market crashed four days later. What luck! But we’re going to continue, one step at a time.”



1st Stage has had three productions during its inaugural season: *The Suicide*, a social satire by Russian writer Nicolai Erdman; Richard Greenberg's comic fantasy *The Violet Hour*; and *Pig Farm*, by Greg Kotis, a send-up of the American government and its citizens. All three have been critical successes.

"I like to produce anything that tells a good story, gets an audience involved, makes them excited about theater," says Mark. "Our productions so far have had a little dark edge, some wry humor. There's nothing better than people walking out smiling. I just want them to be charged up in some way."

Perhaps because he has been a teacher, Mark has included a teaching component in 1st Stage: "One of our actors, Lucas Beck, is teaching a scene study class for high school kids. Most high school classes concentrate on improvisation and how to build a character. Here they get to repeat scenes again and again—they learn by doing the work of acting."

"We'll have more classes in the summer. Beyond the classes, the productions are learning sessions, too. The best metaphor I can use is of a teaching hospital where you have various levels of action and involvement; you have interns and students and residents and professors. It's a place where everyone learns and grows."

"Part of our mission is to put young actors together with people who have more experience. In *The Violet Hour*, for instance, it was great for the younger actors to work with the more experienced ones because they see the older actors' work ethic, how they come prepared. They can teach by example. We're looking for that mix—younger actors and people with a longer list of credits."

Mark looks forward to having a core company at 1st Stage: "My desire is to have a group of actors who would make their

way through each season, because you can't learn from one show. And it's rough to come into a production and then when the show closes, have nothing. If you know you have another job coming, it gives you a longer preparation period and some stability. So each year, we hope to create a company that moves on to bigger and better things."

Mark is a great fan of movies but believes strongly that Tysons Corner deserves more than just cinema for entertainment. "Movies are such a different kind of experience," he says. "In theater you become involved not only in the story but in the actor's craft as well. It's one thing to go to the National Cathedral and take a look at all the stone carvings, but you can't appreciate it until you actually see one of those carvers chiseling away at those stones."

"Live theater offers that same thing. You see the work that goes into telling that story. And here, where you're never more than 25 feet from the action, you're that much more involved in the production itself. The audience is part of the show. Every play we do is an experiment in some sense. We're attempting to connect with an audience."

"In return, people have been so gracious, volunteering their time, energy and expertise. People believe in this theater, believe that it's important. The people who come to our shows understand that there's nothing more exciting than theater."

1st Stage presents *Red Herring*, a film-noir spoof involving politics, love and international intrigue, from April 3 through 26. For information and tickets, visit www.1ststagespringhill.org.

FROM LEFT: TUCKER SPARKMAN, CHARLEY MANN, BELEN PIFEL, AND LUCAS BECK AS TOM, TIM, TINA, AND TEDDY IN THE COMEDY *PIG FARM* AT 1ST STAGE IN TYSONS CORNER.