

Spotlight: Introducing Robert P. Smith

Bennie Scarton, Jr.

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Name: Robert P. Smith

Occupation: Director

Q: You are directing William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice, which opens this weekend by Vpstart Crow Productions at the Cramer Center in Old Town Manassas. What makes the play something that audiences will like?

A: Filled with some of the harshest words of hate and some of the most beautiful prose of love, Merchant is easily one of Shakespeare's most fascinating plays, a complex tale that deals with religious, social and political issues that are still relevant in the modern world. It's a fantastic exploration of humanity keyed on the good and evil in the characters.

Q: What are the dates and times of the play?

A: Set in 1920s Venice, the production will run this Friday to Oct. 21 Fridays and Saturdays at 8 pm. and Sundays at 3 p.m. There will be a talkback with the audience immediately after the Sunday performance.

Q: How would you compare this play with the others you have directed at the Cramer Center, Romeo and Juliet and Julius Caesar?

A: This production has some of the greatest cast members I've ever worked with. It's an outstanding cast of 14.

Q: Who makes up the cast?

A: The Vpstart veterans featured are Colby Coddling (Gratiano), George Kitchen (Antonio), Carl Brandt Long (Lancelot), William MacLeod (Lorenzo), Laura Rocklyn (Jessica), Paul Rubenstein (Salerio), Pamela Sabella (Nerissa), Rich Scanlan (Prince of Morocco/Servant/Duke of Venice) and Jay Tilley (Sylock). Making their Vpstart debuts will be Erin Gallalee (Servant/ Tuba/Balthasar/Stephana), Christopher Holbert (Bassanio), Jon Marget (Solanio/Old Gobbo), Santiago Melli-Huber (Leonardo/Jailer/Prince of Arragon) and Rachel Lee Poole (Portia.)

Q: Other than the plays at the Cramer Center, what other ones have you directed?

A: I've directed more than 50 productions in my nearly 20 years with Fairfax County Public Schools. Including "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "Much Ado About Nothing," "She Stoops to Conquer," "Medea," "Agnes of God," "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," "Arsenic and Old Lace," "The Crucible," "Blithe Spirit," and "Noises Off."

Q: What differences do you find in directing plays for high school students and those for professionals?

A: Not much. I've had some great actors in high school. The major difference would be the professionals can grasp quicker what I want from them in their role because of their past experience.

Q: Are there any two actors or actresses you would like to work with again and again?

A: Jay Tilley who is in this play. He has really impresses me. Also, one of my former students, Christina Hendricks who is starting in television and movie roles. She was phenomenal to work with at Fairfax High School.

Q; Where did you get your theater background?

A: I got my Bachelor of Fine Arts in theater education at Virginia Commonwealth University and my Master of Fine Arts in Creative Drama/Theatre for Youth at the University of Texas at Austin. I also received training in stage combat, acting, technical theatre and theatrical design. I've also had personal and student educational enrichment in London, Rome and Moscow.

Q: When not involved in a production, what do you like to do in your free time?

A: I like to read, almost anything such a science fiction, fantasy and history and spending time with my two boys, Jeremy and Justin.

Q: Where are you from originally?

A: I've spent most of life in the area, growing up in Loudoun County. I now live in Centreville. I like living in this area because of the many opportunities the Washington, D.C., offers a person. As the nation's capital, you get a lot of the national and international news first-hand. I've lived in some towns, but I enjoy the larger cities like Washington and Richmond.

Q: Your production resume includes 50 production director; 31 production designer; 12 productions as fight choreographer, nine productions as a performer, 117 productions as producer and 12 productions as technician/management. Which plays standout as the most memorable?

A: "Noises Off," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and "Agnes of God," at Fairfax-- although there were many others.

Q: Where are you teaching now?

A: I've taken a little career change as I'm now the school based technology specialist at James Madison High School in Vienna. I also hold memberships in such organizations as the Fairfax County Theatre Arts Directors Association and the Virginia State Thespian Society.