

'Junebug/Jack' is musical theater with substance

Local choral groups join presentation

By Jeanne McCartin
Spotlight Correspondent

Rising up from the South is a distinctly American piece of theater called "Junebug/Jack," which will grace the stage of The Music Hall on Friday, Feb. 5.

This original musical play explores the experience of two distinct American cultures in stories and songs. In addition, it will feature the vocals of three local choral groups.

The show is the co-creation of the Roadside Theater which hails from Whitesburg, Ky., and represents the Appalachian Mountain culture and Junebug Productions from New Orleans, which explores the Southern African-American culture.

The show they've collectively created features the oral tradition of both cultures and the music of the blues, bayou funk, four-part harmonies, fiddle and guitar, and when possible, as here in Portsmouth, the backup voices of the visited communities.

"I think this is the very first time The Music Hall has reached out to the local choral community. The groups are very excited," said Wendell Purrington, director for the small choir made up of members from three choral groups that will perform during the show.

"We will be backing up and augmenting the group, doing spirituals, Appalachian and Southern American tunes. That's the spirit of the whole show. It's about the comparison of the oral Southern and black histories; how they are similar and what it's been like for the two cultures in American," he said.

A 15-member choral group will per-

form on stage with the visiting troupe, said Purrington, department head of the arts at Portsmouth High School and director of the Seacoast Community Choir.

This event-specific choral group was formed with five members from each of the three participating organizations: Seacoast Community Choir; the Portsmouth Women's Chorus, directed by Priscilla Stevens French; and the New Hope Baptist Church Choir, directed by Courtney Holloway. In addition, each choral group will perform a song before the program.

Roadside Theater and Junebug Productions together form Roadbug.

They began working with one another in 1981 in a response to a growing division between white and black working-class people and a rise in the activities of the Ku Klux Klan.

Each group had been separately addressing the issue of their own race or geographical peoples. Having met while sharing stages across the country, they were drawn together by the similarities of their messages.

The group employs archetypal characters born of the different cultures, such as Junebug Jabbo Jones and Jack.

Junebug, a folk hero born of the Civil Rights Movement, embodies the wisdom of common people in their struggle for justice. The Jack tales of the Appalachian Mountains generally focus on a boy who succeeds in his trials through a combination of cleverness, will and blind luck.

Through the group's combined works, they address the issues of prejudice, slavery, disappearing values, workplace safety, pride, war and family commitment.

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"We are political only in the sense that we provide an impulse and try to clarify what people can do to improve their own situation," Junebug Productions troupe member John O'Neal said in a newspaper article.

"We want to prompt a discussion ... wherever we are," Roadside director Dudleye Coke said.

Through the blend of music, humorous cultural tales of "everyguy," interesting histories of the human condition within a melting pot nation, and the cooperation of numerous organization, Roadbug hopes to slip in a thoughtful message while offering rich entertainment.

"Courtney took over the first rehearsal of the (15-member) choral group. He left a note saying there were some very excited people," Purrington said. "They had watched a tape of ("Junebug/Jack") ... they're really looking forward to this."

After rehearsing a month, the small choir will work with the "Junebug/Jack" cast during a four-day residency. It's just one of the numerous cooperative efforts in producing a show that will hopefully stimulate more of the same in the community it touches.

Tickets for "Junebug/Jack" are \$23 and \$19; and \$12 for patrons under age 21. For more information call 436-2400.