

Hallelujah – Dramatic Roles for Women *d'un certain age!*

by Amy Lilly

When actors Jennifer Warwick of Shelburne and Janet Stambolian of Burlington decided to produce *Steel Magnolias* at the Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center in Burlington last year, it was mostly because they'd always wanted to act in it. But in the process, they realized that the play – about six Southern women who are friends – offered a rare opportunity: the chance for women *d'un certain age* to play central roles.

"In this day and age, theater caters to the young and the male," asserts Warwick, a high-energy 43-year-old. "Even the roles that are older are being cast young."

Stambolian, garrulous and 62, points out that the older female population "doesn't see itself in popular culture. If you look at TV or film," she says, "you can count on one hand how many Meryl Streeps there are."

So, mid-production, the two friends decided to create a theater company dedicated to putting on plays that featured women – of all ages. Girls Nite Out Productions was born.

The co-founders laugh about how the company "came as a second thought," as Warwick puts it. "It was quite accidental," Stambolian agrees. "It wasn't like she and I had spent years trying to think of the perfect way to get [women] together."

But the two women – who met doing community theater at Lyric Theatre Company in Burlington – had accumulated enough experience to give their serendipitous idea a hint of inevitability. Warwick, a New York City native, earned her Bachelor's in theater in Manhattan and acted there until moving to Vermont in 1994. From the start, she noticed that "plays that have a lot of women's roles and that are funny" are scarce to begin with.

Stambolian, who retains a trace of her childhood New Jersey accent, describes herself as a "lifelong feminist." She became active in the women's movement as a college student in Boston ("Birth control was not available on campuses – can you imagine?" she recalls incredulously), an experience that inspired her to come out as a lesbian. Soon after she moved to Los Angeles, where she did community theater on the side for 20 years before heading to Vermont in 1992.

"As I became older, I became more aware of the dearth of prominent women in media and theater," she recalls. "It was always in the back of my mind that this was wrong. Now, on a very small scale, we're trying to do something about it."

"Let me tell you, we are filling a niche," Warwick declares of the young company. "And," she adds, "it's a chance for women to get all their friends together and go out!"

Indeed, the fun factor is as much the point of Girls Nite Out as putting women in the spotlight. Hence the company's raspberry-pink website and lighthearted name: "girls" instead of the formal "women," no fussy possessive apostrophe, and a "lite" spelling of "night." (According to Stambolian, girlsnightout.com was already taken by a porn site.)

Lyric's executive director Syndi Zook supports GNO's mission on all counts. "What they're doing is absolutely right," she affirms. Plays – and musicals, Lyric's domain – that star women are not commonly performed, she notes, adding wryly, "You can always do Shakespeare and fill it up with 50-year-old guys."

As head of "the mothership" for community acting in the area, Zook is also aware of the need to give local women more stage time. "There are women of a certain age who just don't get to act enough in our area," she avers. "We have this incredible depth of actresses in the community, and it's wonderful to still see them showcase their talents."

And, according to Zook, the majority of theater-goers in the U.S. are women anyway, "so it's very exciting to have someone market directly to them." Surprisingly, few are doing so: neither LA nor New York has a women-focused theater

company, notes Stambolian.

Zook, for one, will be heading "probably with a couple of girlfriends" to Girls Nite Out's second production, *The Hallelujah Girls*, which runs for three nights and two matinees beginning October 6. Written by the trio who created the mid-1980s television series *The Golden Girls*, the 2009 play features six more Southern women friends, all over 50, and two men. Unlike the tear-jerker *Steel Magnolias*, though, *The Hallelujah Girls* is "full-out comedy," according to director Carole Vasta-Folley.

The premise of the play is that, when one of the women's dear friends dies, the rest are galvanized to finally pursue their dreams – age be damned. Leading the pack is Sugar Lee, who buys a decommissioned church and converts it into a day spa she names the Spa-Dee-Dah. Her friends have their own burdens to overcome, aided by spa treatments: one has a son on parole, another has given up on love. And Sugar Lee herself has a nemesis named Bunny (played, incidentally, by *Vermont Woman* contributing writer Roberta Nubile) who's determined to wreck her success.

But not to worry. With its constant stream of witty one-liners

(among them: "the first 40 years of parenthood are the hardest") and a happy ending, *The Hallelujah Girls*

is guaranteed to be a feel-good experience. That's why it appealed to Warwick, who, as artistic director, combed through dozens of plays before choosing it. "We want to do mostly comedies," she says of GNO's mission, "because in this day and age we don't want to go to the theater for two, two and a half hours and be depressed."

Vasta-Folley, who has directed plays in the area since the late 1990s, including one she wrote, admits to "a real fondness for comedy. I think it's where all the rough edges of life can be dealt with," she explains. "Humor can help you get through anything." The 50-year-old Shelburne resident agreed to direct *The Hallelujah Girls* in part because, she says, "I was really moved by [Warwick and Stambolian's] whole mission." She also respects the *Golden Girls* writing trio, noting that they "know how to construct a story. This thing moves."

Margaret Boylan, who will be playing Carlene, was among the 30 women who auditioned for a part. (Each got a hand-written thank-you note from the GNO co-founders, whether she made it or not.) The 61-year-old Essex Junction resident was encouraged to audition by her longtime friend Vasta-Folley, whom she met through the Stowe Theatre Guild.

Connections like these seem to crisscross the production. For set design, Boylan enthuses, Vasta-Folley tapped someone she knew who "does church design for a living" (Ann Vivian).



photo: Lindsay Raymondjack

Top row (left to right): Margaret Boylan, Betsy Conlon, Janet Stambolian, Kelly Kendall
Bottom row, (left to right): Rob Demic, Linda McGinnis, Roy Culter (missing Roberta Nubile)

Stambolian says she knew the costume designer, Suzanne Kneller, through her well-known work at Lyric, and she got to know the sound engineer, her neighbor Ben Mayock, through his posting on Front Porch Forum.

"For me, it's all about building community," Stambolian explains. For that reason, the co-founders are being cautious not to use GNO simply as a vehicle for their own acting. The two women have agreed that, in each play after *Steel Magnolias* (in which Stambolian and Warwick both acted), only one will be precast while the other produces, or auditions for a part. Warwick is producing *The Hallelujah Girls*; Stambolian is playing Mavis, a character both women agreed was perfect for her.

Though GNO is still young, Stambolian and Warwick are developing a business plan that will allow them to compensate cast and crew. Stambolian describes the company as an "evolving hybrid" between community theater, where no one is paid, and professional theater, where everyone is, according to Actors' Equity union rules. Stambolian explains that "to compensate people financially – especially women – is very high-value to us. I believe women are underpaid for the work they do."

First, though, they must establish viability, she adds. They've applied for non-profit status, which will allow them to access grants for the arts, and are considering producing two plays a year, a comedy and a musical, to bring in more ticket sales. Meanwhile, the co-founders are hitting up every angle they can think of.

Warwick found *The Hallelujah Girls*' presenting sponsor in her friend Deirdre Senior, owner of the Shelburne jewelry store A Little

Something, which will host a wine-and-hors-d'oeuvres fundraiser on the evening of September 22. The actor even asked her gynecology and cosmetic-services doctor, Nancy Carlson Fisher, to sponsor the production.

"It was a yes within ten seconds," Warwick recalls with a laugh. Of course, she adds, the doctor's South Burlington practice "will get exposure to a thousand women over the course of the weekend." Carlson Fisher is also donating her services for raffles during performances, along with Massage Envy in Williston and other women-centric businesses.

Stambolian, who does business development for an architectural firm, among other jobs, admits that "it's a really rugged time to be starting something new, [so] I'm very aware of how blessed we are to have gotten the response we're getting."

That response – enthusiasm, across the board – has everything to do with Warwick and Stambolian's determination to make their dream a reality. In fact, their story isn't far from that of *The Hallelujah Girls*, which the actor Boylan sums up as being "about changing your life at any time in your life."

"I'm very proud of Janet and Jennifer that they took something they wanted in their own life and ran with it," she adds simply. Hallelujah.

Girls Nite Out wine-and-hors-d'oeuvres fundraiser: Thursday, September 22, 5:30-8 p.m. at A Little Something, 2989 Shelburne Road, Shelburne.

The Hallelujah Girls: Thursday through Sunday, October 6-9, at the Main Street Landing Performing Arts Center, 60 Lake Street, Burlington. Tickets: girlsnightoutvt.com.

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photo: Lindsay Raymondjack

Crystal and Nita, two of the *Hallelujah Girls!* (left to right): Betsy Conlon and Kelly Kendall