

All the community's a stage for new theatre group

by Georgiana Cohen

With the curtain going up next week on its inaugural production of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead," a new theater group based out of the First Congregational Church, located at 89 College Ave., hopes to spark the spirit of community theatre in Somerville.

Theatre @ First is run by Elizabeth Hunter, a 35-year-old resident of Arlington who said she's been involved in theater "one way or another all my life." In launching the group, she and the church hope to get Somerville residents involved in theater, both as patrons and participants.

Hunter transferred from Columbia University to Wellesley to complete her degree in political science. She said she became involved in theatrical productions at Wellesley, MIT and the Berklee College of Music.

After attending more than 100 plays during a two-year stint recently spent in London, "I realized that I was watching theater as a director," she said. "That told me I should probably be directing."

Hunter's sister, Beckie Hunter, a 44-year-old from Cambridge, has been the moderator at the First Congregational Church since former moderator and community leader Paul Duhamel's death in 1996. "She thought it would be nifty to do a show, and if you're gonna do one show, you might as well form a theater group," said Elizabeth. The church ran a successful Friday night coffeehouse, First Friday at First Church, for ten years until 1995. A theater group sounded like a great way for the church to reconnect with its surroundings.

"Everyone seemed really excited right off the bat," said Beckie, noting that the idea of a theater group fit "our space and our mission."

Rev. Molly P. Baskette has only been the pastor at First Church for three months, but she welcomed the group's inception. "I think we all feel sort of parentally proud to be nesting this venture," she said. "We want to see [Somerville] continue to thrive and burgeon with color and drama and life"

Hence, Theatre @ First was born. Elizabeth chose her favorite play, Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead"-an offshoot of sorts from William Shakespeare's "Hamlet" with a heavy dose of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" thrown in-as the group's debut show because of its classical roots and "particular kind of verbal wit."

Once a show was selected, it was time to reach out to the community. Hunter employed numerous methods, ranging from old-fashioned pavement pounding in Davis Square and beyond, to various online networking forums.

The response was overwhelmingly positive. Between 30 to 35 people comprise the cast and crew, most of whom



John C. Hume (Hamlet)

are Somerville residents ranging from their 20s to middle-age. Cast member Jamin Leopold, a 29-year-old Somerville resident who plays Guildenstern, said his "heart jumped out of my chest" when he saw Hunter hanging up a flyer for auditions at his employer, Cameras Inc. Leopold had taken part in numerous shows at his alma mater, the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, but his last audition had been eight years ago.

"I was definitely nervous and edgy," he said, noting the healthy crop of acting talent he saw at the auditions. But after winning one of the lead roles, he said his experience has been enjoyable thus far.

"I step into this group and every single person is together," he said. "We know each other even though we'd never met before." And for a brand new group, it has been a relatively problem free experience. "So much has fallen

into place it's like it's putting itself together."

Leopold also sees the promise of a new community theater group in Somerville. "Theater is one of the most important pieces of a community," he said. Most people he encounters are "very excited there's going to be a show right nearby."

Hunter and the cast did experience their share of crises when, over the course of rehearsals, nearly half the cast dropped out because of scheduling conflicts. Not to be daunted, Hunter simply mined her vast network to recruit new actors, and the cast never missed a beat. "They've been incredibly supportive," she said.

"We feel like Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney sometimes," said Beckie, referring to the 1939 classic film "Babes in Arms" where two siblings overcome various obstacles to stage a show together.

Elizabeth also hopes to fill what she perceives as a



Jason Merrill (Player), Michael Babish (Rosencrantz), Jamin Leopold (Guildenstern)

void in the Somerville theater scene. "Davis Square is such an arty, funky environment. Where's the community theatre? I'm hoping this can be a real community thing."

The church "is really excited about it," said Elizabeth. Besides providing space for the play in its function room, church members and staff will also help with ushering and refreshments, and one person affiliated with the church is in the cast.

Elizabeth echoes her sister's sentiment that Theatre @ First is one way of many that the church can employ to reach out to people.

"The role of urban churches has changed a lot in the last 50 years or so. They're more detached from the community," explained Elizabeth. "A lot of people feel very intimidated by [churches]. It's good for the church and the community to create events and organizations that make people comfortable with it."

Beckie hopes to "get people into the church building who wouldn't get in otherwise." Ultimately, though, it's about building a relationship with the residents of the city. "I'm into what the church can do for the community," she said.

There are several options being considered for Theatre @ First's next project, ranging from an evening of one-act plays to a full-fledged musical. Regardless of

what they decide to do, Elizabeth hopes to take advantage of the infrastructure and network she built for the show.

"Once you sort of establish yourself and you reach out to an audience, then you've got something and you have a venue for more to do," she said.

Community building through the stage? It works for Elizabeth. "Live theatre," she said, "is a wonderful collaborative art form between the performers and the audience."



Michael Babish (Rosencrantz) and Jamin Leopold (Guildenstern)

(Theatre@First's production of "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead" debuts March 5 at 8 p.m. at the First Congregational Church of Somerville, 89 College Ave. Tickets are \$10, \$7 for seniors and students. Additional performance times are March 6, 12 and 13 at 8 p.m. and 2 p.m. matinees March 7 and 14. For more information, visit www.theatreatfirst.org)

All photos by Jo Guthrie



Michael Babish (Rosencrantz), Erika Reinfeld and Mare Freed (Tragedians), Jamin Leopold (Guildenstern)



Front row - Jason Merrill (Player), Michael Babish (Rosencrantz), Jamin Leopold (Guildenstern). Back row - The Tragedians (Jane Messere, Erika Reinfeld, Mare Fried, Rachel Kline, Kerri Centrella, Aoife Rebeka Barrington-Haber).