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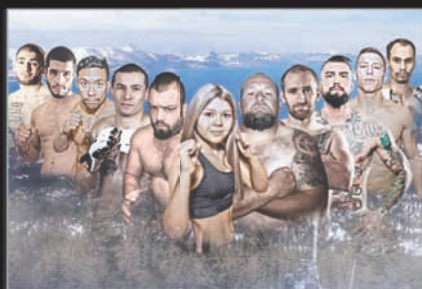
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ART OF THE STATE

BY JESSICA SANTINA



In December, members of Ageless Repertory Theatre performed a reading of *Over The River And Through The Woods* by Joe di Pietro. PHOTO/JERI CHADWELL

Page to stage

Ageless Repertory Theatre

It was 12:45 on a Friday afternoon in December, and I was headed to a staged reading, relatively certain I would be almost entirely alone in the audience. I was going to a play at 1 p.m. on a weekday, after all. But as I pulled up to Reno Little Theater, I was surprised to find there were no empty parking spaces, and I ended up seated in the back row, in a corner. Who knew a weekday-afternoon staged reading would be such a draw?

Lots of folks, actually. These twice-monthly readings performed by Ageless Repertory Theatre consistently draw audiences of 50 to 70, says ART's president Ron Smith, the 83-year-old known locally for his involvement in Sheep Dip and as the voice of the Great Reno Balloon Race.

Founded in early 2000 to provide opportunities for senior citizens to participate in live theater, ART is comprised of about 25 male and female players, ages 50-93. And they are by no means stagnant seniors.

"I've been with it 13 years, and in that time we've produced over 100 different plays," Smith said. "We do a show every month except June and September."

ART is a readers' theater, in which performers read from their scripts in dramatic fashion. Most shows are Broadway-style comedies, although it has taken on dramas, such as *Our Town* and *I Remember Mama*.

The ambitious schedule makes readers' theater a natural fit. "Part of it was that, as you age, it's a bit more difficult to remember all the lines of a complete play, particularly when we stage a new one

every month," Smith explained. "We do four rehearsals and two performances."

The company has changed homes several times since its founding, and its performance style has evolved. When Reno Little Theater expressed interest in hosting ART three years ago, its 100-seat black-box space and willingness to contribute staging and props gave ART a nudge toward more dramatized readings. A grant has helped it pay for a stage manager.

Audience members will find performers mostly dressed in black with occasional costume flourishes, moving about the stage and interacting with each other, their minimal staging and their props as they read from their scripts.

"I usually do an intro to the play and explain to the audience that they are to use their imaginations to envision the scenes to come," Smith said, recalling that in some cases, that may mean suspending disbelief as players take the roles of 20-somethings or even members of varying races.

Audiences have shown they're willing, consistently offering enthusiastic responses, and although admission is always free, contributing donations sufficient enough to enable the company to pay for staging rights on 10 shows a year. No members are paid—Smith, Artistic Director Sharon Maddux and Publicist JoAnne Conley participate voluntarily, as do all of the performers. And their enthusiasm is infectious.

"We do have a cadre of very dedicated people who try to come to every play," Smith said. "We're bringing in new people all the time. It often comes from people in the audience who have seen a show and then approached us about joining up. Others have heard or read about us. We're always looking to bring new folks on." □

Bakersfield Mist is the next staged reading that will be performed at Reno Little Theater, 147 E. Pueblo St., on Jan. 22 and 25 at 1 p.m. Admission is free, though donations are accepted at the door and benefit Ageless Repertory Theatre. For more information, call 813-8900.