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A&C



Michael Pollock dives deep into character as a retirement home nurse.

PHOTO BY RACHEL MAYFIELD

Turning the tables

Role-playing games get the theater treatment

BY RACHEL MAYFIELD / rachelm@newsreview.com

It was a typical holiday party at the retirement home—bright, cheery and full of music and laughter. All was well, until Al, everyone's least-favorite retiree, ripped off a woman's lower-lip and kick-started a zombie outbreak.

That was the nail-(and face)-biting scenario of “’Twas the Bite Before Christmas,” episode six, season two of B Street Theater’s live role-playing game, *Seekers of the Strange*.

Created by company member John Lamb, *Seekers* takes inspiration from tabletop RPGs—think *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Call of Cthulhu*—but it has a more theatrical approach.

“I think a lot of people thought that, if you have a bunch of talented people role-playing, it’s basically theater,” Lamb told SN&R after the show. “You have actors up here trying to achieve objectives and telling stories. It’s just not scripted.”

The episodes started in May 2018, and they centered around a television crew of paranormal investigators—played by core members Stephanie Altholz, Lyndsay Burch, Michael Pollock and Tara Sissom. Since then, stories have branched off to explore other characters and story threads.

Lamb directs the game from a podium onstage, while the *Seekers* play out his scenario with little knowledge other than who their character is. It opens things up for plenty of improvised scenes and offbeat choices.

“It’s typical to know only what your character knows,” Lamb explains. “So sometimes they’ll have back stories, which I write to build conflict with each other, which would be ruined if they discovered that before they do onstage.”

“The first episode we ever played—you know, we each have our own private objectives,” says Altholz. “I had this objective just to get this book ... I just became so myopic about it that my character—who was not a bad person—I just

murdered everybody on stage. And like, everybody helped me.”

By design, audience participation is integral to *Seekers*. Before a show, audience members are given “secret tokens.” If a player wants to pick a lock or stab a zombie, they can solicit tokens from the audience to raise their skill level and increase their odds of picking ... or stabbing.

“I really wanted to get the audience involved and play with us, which is why I created the system with the tokens,” Lamb says. “To actually make the game mechanics make the audience part of the game.”

They also have a bit of a cult following—a mix of older B Street subscribers and younger tabletopers, drawn in by *Seekers* lore and callbacks to past episodes. One hard-core attendee brings an inexplicably thick binder to every show. What’s in it? None can say. Probably character sheets, mostly.

Lamb’s RPG experience dates all the way to junior high, when his mom gifted him his first *Dungeons & Dragons* set. He was hooked. Since then, he’s been running campaigns with friends for the past couple decades. The *Seekers* have also joined him for tabletop campaigns outside of the show.

“We all at one point played a game with Johnny,” says Sissom. “But I feel like we’re all—in this theater—we’re all pretty nerdy. We’re just about as nerdy as you’re gonna get. But for me, I’ve never done anything like [*Seekers*] before, because I don’t know how many things like this exist.”

Moving forward, the crew hopes to take their game show on the road, and maybe even make a stop at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, which opens in August in Scotland.

“We’re interested in traveling with it—almost—because John has put so much work into ... all of these stories, and we play them one time in front of [a Sacramento] audience,” Burch says. “But like, what if we played another scenario again while traveling, played different characters?”

Burch and the others believe that the game’s accessible nature and spontaneity can interest new viewers in joining.

“It’s fun, it’s casual,” Burch says. “People can sit at tables or chairs and have a drink and play with us.” □

Seek out *Seekers of the Strange* 7 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 5. Tickets are \$12. B Street Theatre, 2700 Capitol Ave., bstreettheatre.org.