

Theatre in the Rough: a collaboration

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When Katie Jensen and Aaron Elmore were growing up, they wanted the same thing. They wanted to be forest rangers.

They didn't plan on being Hamlet and Joan of Arc. They never dreamed they'd form a husband-and-wife theater company, produce Shakespeare and build a reputation as a powerhouse team of consummate theater artists with Theatre in the Rough.

They are a potent combination: opera singer, dancer and stage director combined with master tailor, graphic designer and fight choreographer.

"They have so many talents," said actor Ed Christian, a participant in numerous Theatre in the Rough productions. "All their work is collaborative - they draw a lot from each other."

"We're a good team," Jensen said. She directed her husband in "Hamlet," he sang with her in "Tales of Ossian," and they built puppets together for "The Merry Wives of Windsor," their current production.

Elmore and Jensen sensed their potential when they first met in the hallway in Merchants Wharf in 1990.

"I saw him and that was it," Jensen said. "He proposed to me three weeks later."

They were in their late 20s. They were doing the same thing, but they weren't forest rangers. They were acting and singing.

"His hair was this long when I met him," Jensen said, holding her fingers an inch apart. "He was in Skagway doing a 'Days of '98' show and all the kids I'd gone to college with were in it. I was doing 'Lady Lou Revue' and they came down to visit me."

They married a year later. Jensen retired from "Lady Lou" after 614 1/2 shows and they spent the last check staging their first show together, "Tally's Folly."

"We had \$600," Elmore said. "Half of it went for the rights and half for the space. We partially paid for the space by fixing these torn curtains there."

"We cut up scrap pallets and built a set," Jensen said.

"That was an outstanding show," Christian said. "It had only two characters, it was Katie and Aaron. The audience was jammed in a tiny space. The acting was very good and it got a lot of attention in the theater community."

The two made back their money and had enough left over to seed the next production, a ballet theater piece based on "Peter and the Wolf."

Before long they got a call from writer and performer David Hunsaker, artistic director for Naa Kahidi Theater in the mid 1990s. They went on to collaborate on a number of projects.

Hunsaker said if he can dream up a prop, Elmore can make it real.

"In the 'Far Away Drum,' Aaron created this huge skeleton of a flying hawk, like a three-man puppet the size of a small glider," Hunsaker said. "We performed in Albuquerque at the University of New Mexico and this thing would fly out over the audience. It was a spectacle."

For another show, "Cahulian's Fight With The Sea," Hunsaker wanted to mix Irish myths with Japanese theater. To his delight, he discovered Jensen had studied Japanese theater and dance and knows Kabuki and Noh styles.

Elmore's talents with a sewing machine have given him more than a break on rent. He's dressed kings and queens, monsters and maidens, and earned a living designing costumes. The two share a room-size closet jammed with Elizabethan and Victorian outfits. They buy silk in 50-yard bolts - three bolts at a time.

His mother taught him how to sew on a old black Singer machine when he was 10 years old, growing up on a ranch in the wine country around Santa Rosa, Calif. He still has his first project, a big quilt with a Ranger Rick and Snoopy and the Red Baron motif.

"Another Aaron Elmore overachiever project," he said. "When I overachieve I make a quilt. When Katie overachieves she gets two degrees."

Jensen grew up in a suburb of Portland, Ore., called Aloha. She sang in the Seattle Opera as part of the chorus and did a few gigs with a punk rock band called Dead Cat (it was a joke on punk bands, she said,) before her voice got her an opera scholarship at Brigham Young University in Utah. She earned degrees in theater and opera performance, and minored in German and equitation. She competed in the steeple chase, turning to horses as balance for all that theater and fine art, she said.

She didn't pursue opera - theater is just more interesting, she said.

"It pulls in so many elements, dance, singing, visual arts and synthesizes it," she said.

Synthesis is the heart of their work, as is collaboration with each other and fellow actors and designers.

"We feed off it," Jensen said.

Actors volunteer to work on Theatre in the Rough productions, but there is no shortage of rewards.

"They make it pretty easy for anyone working with them," Hunsaker said. "It's wonderful they've chosen to live in Juneau. They'd be great assets to Ashland or Stratford or places with Shakespeare festivals. At the same time they go off every day to their day jobs and a couple times of year make these presents of these wonderful theater pieces for the town. Their work grows out of their desire to live here."

"We just feed it, and it gives," Jensen said. "It's just so fun to play with, to have somebody like Aaron to do this with, and a place like Juneau."