

Unseen duo keeps Shuler shows running smoothly

By Tim Keller

Special to The Chronicle-News

RATON — From the darkened auditorium of the Shuler Theater, audience members watch as each actor enters the stage exactly when and where they're supposed to, with exactly what they're supposed to have in hand and on head, just as the right sound effect lands to just the right lighting effect.

Constantly coordinating every cue, and constantly in communication through their headsets, Stefani Milstrey and Mariah Fleming are never seen or heard by the audience, but if the two decided on a whim to go for a walk down Second Street while a play continued on stage, the audience would witness cascading chaos as the show fell apart.

Milstrey watches and works from the sound and light booth high above the balcony. Fleming works in the dark just off stage, always dressed in black.

The two arrive at the theater 30 minutes ahead of the actors and don their headsets 10 minutes before the doors open to the public. By the time the pair is ready to leave the theater, the actors have already been gone for an hour. The two women started working several days before the actors reported to work. Throughout the weeks of rehearsals, with 12-hour days and six-day weeks, they sometimes worked through their lunch and dinner breaks.

Such is the summer of a stage manager.

Milstrey arrived on Memorial Day, her first time in New Mexico. She got the theater bug at Ballston Spa Middle School, just outside Saratoga Springs, N.Y. "I volunteered to do backstage work and fell in love with it," she says during a rare break in the Shuler lobby.

Except for one non-speaking role in "A Christmas Carol," she's never been in a play; it's the backstage doings that she loves.

At a college fair, she discovered the theater program of Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pa. She graduated in May with a major in



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Mariah Fleming, left, and Stefani Milstrey have combined forces, and headsets, to produce a smooth-running series of plays at the Shuler Theater this summer. Here the stage managers pause on the "Web of Murder" set.

technical theater and a minor in finance: stage managers have to keep track of budgets.

As Raton's luck would have it, Juniata College is the alma mater of the Shuler Theater's Bill Fegan. He has stayed in touch. He asked this spring if the theater department could send him a good production stage manager.

Milstrey arrived for a summer stay of 70-hour workweeks, housed in an apartment provided by the Shuler's summer repertory program. But a funny thing has happened: she's fallen in love with Raton. She's now looking for her own home and a day job to sustain her while she grows into being a fixture at the Shuler Theater, its resident production stage manager.

Ironically, Fleming, who's been here all along, is leaving. She grew up in Raton and at the

Shuler Theater, but after graduating from Raton High School in May, she's headed south to NMSU at Las Cruces to study environmental science and music. Wherever she goes, she plans to remain involved with community theater.

"My dad and grandma used to work with Bill Fegan managing shows, and they took acting companies out on tour, so I grew up around the Shuler," Fleming says. Her grandmother is Sue Fleming, her father Matthew Fleming, who returned to the Shuler stage as Bob Cratchit in last December's "A Christmas Carol."

"I just gradually got into it," Mariah says. "They started letting me help when I was 6. I made my stage debut with Missoula Children's Theatre: I was a butterfly."

For the past six years, she's

been on the Shuler's backstage crews for most of its local productions. Along the way, she was also an award-winning flutist with the RHS band and singer with the RHS choir, shining in competitions as far flung as Dallas, San Antonio and St. Louis.

Although she won't try to make her living in it, her love for theater runs deep. "I enjoy being able to take people into fantasy for a while, away from reality," she says. "It's fun to watch people's mindsets change. It happens on stage and off stage. Theater changes lives; it changes people."

Milstrey agrees; in fact, the two have been working so closely all summer that they tend to collaborate even on the sentences as they talk about it. Milstrey says, "To be able to put someone else's vision up on stage, it's fun to be part of

that process. It's my passion."

In addition to stage managing, Milstrey has the audio design credit for "Web of Murder," which opened last weekend and continues Thursday and Aug. 23. As she begins to explain how critical sound is to the murder mystery, she describes the effect as "Ominous..." Then Fleming says, "...scary..." Then Milstrey says, "...and suspenseful," still completing each other's sentences.

"The sound sets the entire mood of the play," Fleming says. She'll have her mind on other things, though, while Milstrey, assisted by Kate Little, is running lights and sound for "Web of Murder." Fleming will be in the dark, doing what she refers to as actor wrangling and crew wrangling.

She'll be doing it for 12 more shows this summer, linked by headset to Milstrey. Amidst the audience laughter — and perhaps some gasps during "Web of Murder" — most people viewing the shows won't even know the two gals are there — the two busiest people in the building, working behind the scenes, exactly as they like it.

The Shuler Theater's summer season continues with performances of "Web of Murder" Thursday and Aug. 2-3; "Servant of Two Masters" this Saturday and Sunday; and "Church Basement Ladies" Friday and Aug. 4. The season closes with the Raton Youth Theater Summer Musical, "Roald Dahl's Willy Wonka, Jr.," Aug. 10-12.

Evening shows start at 7:30 p.m., Sunday matinees at 2:30 p.m. Added matinee performances of "Church Basement Ladies" will be presented Friday and Aug. 4.

General admission tickets are available at the door — \$15 adults, \$13 seniors, \$5 children. Additional information is available at the Shuler Theater, (575) 445-4746.

'Fox on Fairway' to end SCRT's summer season

The Chronicle-News

The Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre's final summer season professional production begins a three-week run Friday at the Massari Performing Arts Center on the Trinidad State Junior College campus.

"The Fox on the Fairway" is a romantic comedy that mixes "golf, romance and fashion," according to the Naples Daily Review.

The show will return several professional actors to Trinidad, including David Billman, who was in "On Golden Pond;" Matt DuMont, who played in "On Golden Pond" and "They're

Playing Our Song;" and Rachel Valencich, who played in "Nonsense" and "They're Playing Our Song."

The play will run over the next three weekends, with performances planned Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 2:30 p.m.

There will also be 7:30 p.m. performances on Aug. 2-4, as well as a 2:30 p.m. matinee on Aug. 5.

Tickets are available at the Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre box office, Monday through Saturday or online at www.scrtheatre.com.



Courtesy Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre

Southern Colorado Repertory Theatre actor David Billman, as club owner Bingham, practices his tee shot on an unsuspecting club member played by Adrienne Bergeron, after they've both had a bit too much champagne.

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