

Getting To Know Nanci Bjorling

Nanci wrote and directed this year's Twelfth Night play. She kindly agreed to answer my questions about her involvement in Nakoma's oldest social event.

How long have you lived in Nakoma?

We moved here in November 1985 (24 years ago!)

What is your favorite thing about our neighborhood?

The people! Some neighbors are as close to us as family.

How did you first become involved with Twelfth Night?

I saw my first Twelfth Night in 1989, and it looked like fun! In 1990, I joined the cast and after that, I was hooked.

How many years have you been the playwright?

I wrote as a part of a "team" for seven plays and three as a "solo."

Is it hard to come up with a new play each year?

Some years are easier than others. It helps to keep a list of current events and random thoughts/topics, and then bounce ideas off friends until they say "That one!"

How long does it take to write them?

Once the main idea is decided, I write a story outline. I've taken writing classes on story and character development and comedy writing, but writing a play is different than fiction writing. The length of the show, dialog, planning entrances and exits all make it more complicated.

The first draft of the script requires 10-15 hours at the computer. More hours are spent on fine-tuning dialog, adding characters, etc.

Is being a playwright a hobby or your career?

Pure hobby. I wish I could make money from it! I have fun with the script. I know the veteran actors quite well and try to write parts that accent their strengths.

My paying job is in marketing.

Are you the director?

Yes. With Twelfth Night, direction is done by the writer(s). I think directing is harder than

writing. Trying to keep track of 20+ actors, make changes when necessary, and remember numerous details can be challenging. There's only one performance so we have only one chance to get it right.

What's your favorite Twelfth Night Play so far?

Tough question – but I think it would be "The Wizard of Nakoma." It was my first time as the writer and director, and I learned so much! The costumes, scenery, songs, dance numbers – I was amazed at the talents and support of the cast and how dedicated they were to this special neighborhood event. It's been wonderful to see how long Twelfth Night has endured.

What is your favorite Twelfth Night memory?

Another tough question! One night I'll never forget was several years ago when Hank Peters sang in his final Twelfth Night appearance. He had performed in Twelfth Night shows for over 40 years and his solos with his opera-trained voice were always a hit with the audience. He was 85 years old when he sang for us for the last time. It was a very emotional and memorable evening.

Who helps out behind the scenes?

There is a core of people who "mold" the show before the actors can shine. Betty Buchanan is the producer and has been involved in Twelfth Night shows since 1964. She's our liaison with the church and Nakoma Board, rents the lighting equipment, and keeps us all on task. Bruce Geiger chooses the music, re-writes lyrics, and along with pianist Emily Wixson, makes us all sound the best we can. Sarah Walgenbach and Amy Kruger are highly trained dancers who choreograph the musical numbers and plan actors' stage movements. Rob Lux is a professional engineer who can put together scenery, props, add sound effects and is a true problem-solver. Twelfth Night needs all their talents.

Who can be in the play? Tell me about the rehearsal process.

An announcement appears in the Nakoma Newsletter in the fall, asking neighbors who want to be involved in Twelfth Night to call Betty Buchanan. When we know how many actors we have, the script writing can begin.

There are no try-outs – and no theatrical experience is expected. We can tailor parts as to how much an actor wants to do. If someone wants to help, but not act, we can use help with scenery, costumes – and more.

The entire cast meets in early January, parts are decided and songs are finalized.

We split into small groups and schedule rehearsals for dance numbers and songs. After several weeks of rehearsing in cast members' homes, we spend the final week before the performance rehearsing at the church. Those all-cast rehearsals last 2-3 hours each night. If we weren't laughing so hard, we'd probably be done a little earlier.

Twelfth Night is our oldest neighborhood tradition. Why do you think it has such longevity?

Wisconsinites adapt to long winters by finding fun where they can! What can be more fun than enjoying cocktails and dinner with your neighbors, and then watching a musical comedy performed by folks who want to make you laugh? It's an evening of pure entertainment right down the street.

What happens after the show? Do you have any fun traditions?

The night before the show we have two dress rehearsals and then go to Tony Franks for burgers. This year we watched the opening ceremonies of the Olympics, which was quite timely as that was the topic of this year's show.

On Saturday night after the performance, a party is held at a cast member's house.

The show is taped, and we watch the performance from an audience view!

Nanci, thank you for taking the time to be interviewed and thanks for all the fun evenings your writing and directing has brought to the neighborhood over the years!