New theater company pays homage to late teacher

Group named after Harold Norman puts on 1st show, 'Curtains'

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WHATZUP EDITOR

PUBLISHED JULY 23, 2025

When Amy J. Jagger set out to showcase the theatrical talent produced in Whitley County, choosing the name The Harold Company Performers was an easy one.

Paying homage to former Churubusco High School teacher and theater director Harold Norman, The Harold Company Performers will put on their first show, *Curtains*, Friday-Saturday, Aug. 1-2, at Columbia City High School Performing Arts Center.

"He just left an absolute significant legacy," Jagger said of the late Norman, who directed plays and musicals at Churubusco from 1974-99. "It's so fun for the company because pretty much everybody that's in the company was either directly influenced by Harold or indirectly. By that, I mean, like one of the men in the company (Shane Barkley), he was a kid when he met Harold, and he has become theater director at Columbia City High School.

"So, several of the Columbia City (High School) alumni that are in the show had Shane as a director and Shane had Harold as a director. It's just fun to see how Harold's legacy has spread. He was just an absolute delight. He was such a hard worker and he demanded, and not in a negative way in any sort of kind of connotation, but, he just had very high expectations and that's something that is transferred to our company — expectations are very high."

CURTAINS
The Harold Company Performers
7:30 p.m. Friday-Saturday, Aug. 1-2
Columbia City High School PAC
1600 S. State Road 9, Columbia City
$10-$15

TEACHER'S IMPACT

For Jagger, her introduction to Norman came before she even began taking his college prep English course at Churubusco.

"I did summer stock theater as a kid (at Enchanted Hills Playhouse in Syracuse) and he would always show up," she said. "Of course, I hadn't had him in class, but I knew his name was Harold Norman and I knew he was a teacher at Churubusco, but I didn't know that he would become such a crucial part of my life.

“After I graduated from high school, I got a teaching job at Churubusco, so I was in elementary and he was in the high school. When I was 24, he asked me if I would like to take over directing Churubusco High School musicals. I think back to that and for him to hand this established excelling program over to this 24-year-old kid …. wow.

“He helped me and he guided me, and through the years he just became one of my closest friends, and unfortunately he passed away in December of 2020. And I still think, ‘Oh, I need to tell Harold this,’ or ‘Oh, when I talked to Harold.’ Not only then was it theater, but he was just a part of my life. Everyone that you talk to feels that way. It’s not just that he had a special affinity for Amy J. Jagger. I mean he invested in everybody, and people can relate to this because a lot of people do have a Harold in their lives, or they wish they had a Harold in their lives — someone who sticks with them, through thick and thin, and is always there to support them.”

So, about a year ago, Jagger’s husband, Chad, came up with the idea to form a theater company.

Even though Amy J. said her husband is very much a behind-the-scenes kind of guy when it comes to theater, the idea to start a theater company was appealing.

“This dream started to come alive, ‘What if we started a company and what if we were able to showcase the immense talent that has been produced and homegrown in Whitley County?’ ” she said. “So, everyone that is in the show has a connection to Whitley County.”

Among the cast is Barkley, who will also be playing Det. Frank Cioffi and directing the production.

“He just he reminds me so much of Harold because, not that Harold was ever in the shows, but Harold was always wearing a million hats and doing a million things,” Jagger said.

Along with directing and starring in the show, Barkley is also a member of The Harold Company Performers board of directors, alongside Amy J. Jagger, Chad Jagger, Melanie Bechtold, and pianist Melissa Baughman.

Describing Bechtold as “the brains of the operation,” Jagger said that it was when she and Barkley joined the team that things really got going for the company.

“When we had this idea and we started looking into creating the not-for-profit, my husband said, ‘OK, this is how much money we can put down to start it, and let’s look for grants and such,’ ” she said. “Then when Shane and Melissa said they would be on board as orchestra leader/pianist and director, I knew this is going to take off. But it’s still slightly frightening, and I can totally admit that.”

BRINGING OUT THE ROLODEX

With a board in place, Jagger then turned to her experience in local theater to fill out the cast, which required her to call in some favors.

“Everybody has been very willing to do the work,” Jagger said. “For costumes, I basically told the cast, ‘Hey, you’re probably gonna have to find her own costumes and pay for your own costumes.’ But everybody has such a shared vision of such a high-quality show in honor of Harold that it’s actually just been a labor of love.”

Performing that labor of love have been Jared Arntz, Maren Augustine, Barkley, Ella Barrand, Raymond Barrand, Matt Faley, Sidney Basham Franks, Todd Franks, Rosalie Geller, Emma Gilbert, Keith Gilbert, Tiffany Graham, Greg Hockemeyer, Jagger, Cody Kessler, Abby Peterson, Cassandra Petrie, Brayden Ridley, Brian Sheppard, Eric Smead, Nathanael Thomas, and Ryan Ward.

“Our most avant-garde actor is Brian Sheppard, and he is coming all the way from New York City where he has acted in off-Broadway productions and he’s been on *The Walking Dead* and *Law and Order: SVU*,” Jagger said. “He was actually my third grade student, then was in musicals at Churubusco High School. Now he’s taking a week to leave his job and come home. So, you know, we’re just truly honored to have some really high-quality folks.”

Along with the cast, Baughman will be leading an orchestra that includes Mark Cheshier, Lori Haydl, Jason Hershman, and Sue Lough.

AFFORDABLE NIGHT OUT

What these actors and musicians will be presenting is a comedic story that Jagger hopes serves as an escape for attendees.

“It’s a 2007 Broadway Tony Award-nominated musical comedy murder-mystery,” she said of *Curtains*. “So, spoiler alert, someone is going to die, and it’s a show within a show. It’s about this group that’s putting on a show called *Robbin’ Hood*. In the midst of putting on this show, someone dies. And then, the whole show is about trying to figure out who the murderer is. And you just have these larger-than-life characters. It is PG-13 because there is some language.”

And to make the show an economic choice, tickets are $10 in advance or $15 at the door.

“That’s part of our mission, because as we look around the community, we don’t have a lot of shared experiences anymore,” Jagger said. “We all sit at home and we stream. So, come to a theater and be together and share some laughter. This show, it’s just zany. It’s a musical-comedy murder. There’s nothing terribly serious, it’s just sheer fun.

“We want people to say, ‘Hey, wait a minute, I could take my entire family of four for $40,’ and, honestly, at most places that’s one ticket. We’re really trying to make it accessible for people so that finances are not a barrier.”

The show is also not going to be a one-time thing. The Harold Company Performers already have shows slated for down the road.

“I hope that after I’m long gone, the intent is that this theater company goes on and on,” Jagger said. “We’re going to try to do a big production every other year. Then, on like our off-big production years, we’ll have more of like a cabaret concert type of thing. Next summer, we’re doing a production called *Just a Few of Our Friends: Sondheim’s Songs* and that’s a play on *Sondheim’s Old Friends* on Broadway.

“The big one I’m super-excited about in 2027, we’ve gone ahead and announced it, we’re going to do *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. So many people are already very excited about that.”

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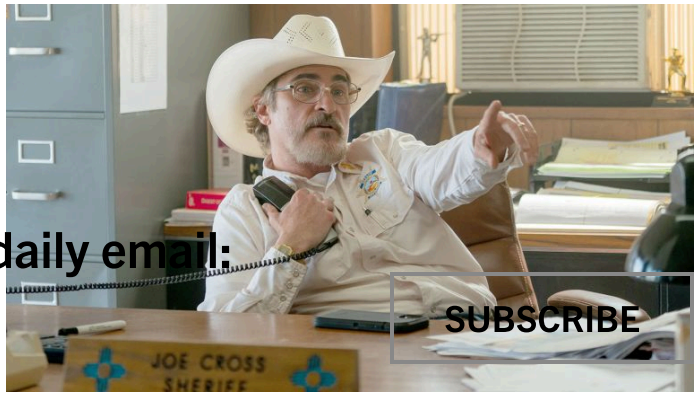

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