



Same old story at Maynard's Acme Theater? Not quite

By Lenny Megliola/Daily News staff

GHS

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MAYNARD — "I personally chose this show to specifically do a play about love at an older age," says Acme Theater's artistic director, Dave Sheppard.

The play is "The Trading Post," and the two lead characters are in their 60s, although the actors playing them are not. You might think playing a character over 60 in a play with a romantic bent may be a stretch, or maybe some actors just think they're too young and pretty to go there. Not according to Sheppard, who's directing the play that begins an April 25-May 17 run at Acme's quaint Summer Street space. "We had the largest turnout for auditions than we've had in a long time," says Sheppard.

The leads went to Framingham resident Dee Swan and Sudbury's Tom Powers. "I've known Dee for years," says Sheppard. "You can't meet her and not like her. She had a bounce, an energy. She's very engaging, a dream to work with. Dee asks questions."

Powers didn't blow Sheppard away at the first audition. The second night, he nailed the role of Wallace. Powers, who has expertise in behind-the-scenes machinations, was no stranger to Sheppard. "He's been helping out here for a couple of years," says Sheppard, who admires the way Powers goes about things. "He's one of those guys who takes life as it comes."

Swan, stage-aholic

Swan admits "I get itchy as soon as a show's over." No problem. With a well-earned reputation, she has kept busy as an actor. For years she's graced the boards at distinguished local theater companies (Vokes, Quannapowitt, Hovey, Arlington), and when Acme decided to do "The Trading Post," she was all over it.

"This is about the relationship of two older people. To me, that was gold. They're very complex people."

Swan plays Claudia. "She's wonderful. In my mind she's kind of a cross between Katherine Hepburn and Dolly Parton. She's vivacious, vibrant, eccentric; one of those people that gets a lot out of life.

"She's always learning. One of those rare people who everyone likes. And she likes herself too."

Swan admits "to find an age-related role is tough. Most roles are for the under-30 set, unless it's a minor role as an aging mother."

Originally from a small Iowa town, Swan grew up on a fruit and vegetable farm. But the theater life took hold early. When she was 16, Swan was hired by the Ice House Theater Co, a summer repertory. "Then I went back to high school and got my diploma." She concedes that theater is a "dog-eat-dog world, but it's always been my passion."

After high school, Swan started working in the Houston area. Marriage (and divorce) followed. She fled to the New England area, and fell in love with it.

Swan works at Southgate At Shrewsbury, a fancy retirement and assisted living place with a handsome theater, a job that's right up her alley as she is the activity director in charge of entertainment. She books shows for the residents, often calling on renowned Westborough theater impresario Ed Cornerly to stage a production.

As age doesn't slow down Claudia in "The Trading Post," Swan often sees the same thing at Southgate At Shrewsbury, where most of the residents are 60 to 80 years old. "You don't stop playing because you get old, you get old because you stop playing," says Swan. It's a rule she is personally following.

On Saturdays, Swan cooks and serves meals to the homeless, a Framingham Civic League program.

Some woman, this Swan.

Getting his feet wet

While Swan goes from one role to another, Powers concedes, "I'm not an experienced actor." OK, he's been with the Sudbury Savoyards for more than 20 years. But his contributions have been mostly out of the limelight, building sets, working backstage, etc. "I'm basically applying my skills as a computer engineer to theater equipment," he says. "The tools are pretty much the same."

So when did he take the acting plunge? "I got interested in what makes (a show) happen." His wife, Nancy, had been a regular in Sudbury Savoyards productions, mostly as a chorus member. In 2003, he landed a role in "Hay Fever." It was a beginning. "They were short on men. I decided to take a stab at it. I thought I did OK. No one was telling me I wasn't." He also was in the company's "Matchmaker" and has served as Savoyards' board chairman.

Powers and his wife became theater buffs when the Chiswick Theater was doing big productions in Sudbury. Chiswick eventually closed, but it left a lasting impression on the local theater scene with its ambitious work.

Powers has had a number of roles in Acme's New Works Winter Festival, a popular series of 10-minute (more or less) plays. He also started working on Acme's sets. He has become a versatile and valued contributor to the company. Sheppard feels blessed to have him aboard. Actually, the two have versatility in common. Sheppard does it all: act, produce, set and scenic design, lighting. "Dave's a jack of all trades," says an admiring Powers. "He's serious about how the company works."

In "The Trading Post," Powers plays Wallace, who runs a store in a small Tennessee town. Wallace and Claudia "have been together 16 years, platonically," says Powers. Both have children from a previous marriage. The twist, says Powers, is this: "Are they more platonic friends, or does one realize it's more than platonic? They live separately, and they're trying to get their son and daughter together."

And so the story unfolds.

Although a late bloomer to being on stage, Powers is getting the feel of it. It's a good feeling. He even enjoys "the process of going to auditions." The most rewarding part is bringing his character to life.

"The Trading Post" gives him his best chance yet to do so.

"Trading Post" runs April 25 to May 17 at Acme Theater, ArtSpace Maynard, 61 Summer St., Maynard. Tickets are \$16 for

adults, \$14 for seniors and students. Call 978-823-0003 or go to www.acmetheater.com for more information.

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