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FOR PLAN-B CO-FOUNDER, DEDICATION PAYING OFF

By Barbara M. Bannon | October 28, 2007

Without Cheryl Ann Cluff, it's unlikely that Plan-B Theatre would exist.

Yet even fans of the company's productions may not know her.

Her name is on the program as "managing director," and she has designed the sound for most of Plan-B's shows since the beginning and sometimes acted in them, but Cluff has always been content to remain behind the scenes.

It was Cluff who nurtured Plan-B through the lean years, mothering it like a wayward child until it could stand on its own. And she did it all while juggling a full-time job as Intermountain Health Care's communications manager and some semblance of a personal life.

Today Cluff has a real child, son Charlie, and is expecting a second child in March. But Plan-B remains a vital part of her life. She is working on her pet project, Plan-B's annual Halloween "Radio Hour" with Doug Fabrizio of KUER's "RadioWest." This year the show has a different emphasis. Instead of relying on adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe or reworking radio dramas from the 1940s or '50s, Plan-B resident playwright Matthew Ivan Bennett created two original scripts based on Utah ghost legends from the late 1800s.

The first, which Cluff calls a "haunting love story," is "Lavender," which features a mysterious young woman who shows up at a Pioneer Day dance. "Exile" focuses on a grave robber named John Baptiste who is banished to Antelope Island and then disappears.

Last year's actors are back - Jay Perry, Chelsi Stahr and Teresa Sanderson. Cluff directs, but Cory Thorell designed the sound this year, with original music by Ricklen Nobis. Listen for Fabrizio, who makes a cameo appearance.

Cluff's involvement with radio and sound, like most of her experiences with Plan-B, is the result of happy accidents.

Growing up, she loved listening to the radio. When she and Tobin Atkinson started Plan-B in 1991, Atkinson thought it would be a great idea to do "Macbeth" as a radio drama.

"That's where I started doing sound," Cluff said, "and that renewed the interest that I had as a kid. I really love how [radio] invokes the imagination."

Even starting Plan-B happened almost by accident. Cluff and Atkinson went through the theater program at Southern Utah State College (now University) and "bounced around a lot of ideas" about theater. When both ended up back in Salt Lake, Atkinson suddenly said one day: "Do you want to do our own thing and see what happens?"

"We just started doing things when we could pay for them, when we could find a venue," Cluff remembers. By 1995, they had decided to become a nonprofit theater company and do a full season. "We started doing five shows that first year on about \$10,000, which was insane," Cluff laughs. "We did shows in classrooms, at the Art Barn and in school auditoriums. We really were a gypsy theater company."

She had no expectations. "I certainly didn't expect it to last this long," she says. "It turned out I really believed in what we were doing, that it was important and we needed to stick around and remain alive. We were trying things that nobody else was doing."

Atkinson eventually left the company and Cluff realized she was on her own.

"It was very stressful," she admits. She had a few people like Randy Rasmussen and Cory Thorell to help, but running the company became her job alone. "I don't know how I did it; I just did," she recalls. "We had a few bumps: some shows were canceled, we lost our space at the New Hope [Community Center], Morgan Ludlow offered to step in and then moved to California. I was ready to give up."

Then came a final happy accident. Ludlow had lined up Jerry Rapier to direct "Molly Sweeney," Plan-B's first show of the 2001 season, and he thought Rapier might be interested in helping run the company.

"I said, 'OK, I'll just talk to this guy and see what happens,' " Cluff laughs. The rest, as they say, is history.

Rapier brought new energy, expertise and a sense of commitment. He and Cluff realized the company needed to take on more social and political issues, especially local ones, and Cluff sees their 2001 award-winning production of "The Laramie Project" pointing them firmly in that direction.

The company acquired a permanent home at the Rose Wagner, negotiated a Small Professional Theatre agreement with Actors' Equity and began producing original work. Cluff can't say enough good things about her partner: "I do a lot for Plan-B, but I have a full-time job and family; Jerry is carrying this company on his shoulders. A lot of other people do stuff, but he's amazing."

Cluff sees another transition coming with the new baby, but says Plan-B is an essential part of her life. "It's a lot of work, but it's worth it. Anybody who loves theater will tell you that. Other people think you're crazy to devote all this time to plays, but look at the impact that 'Facing East' had; it could have changed lives. It's not every day that you get to have that much impact on people, and I think 'Exposed' [Plan-B's current production] will have a big impact in a totally different way."

The child has come of age.

LISTEN UP

Plan-B Theatre Company presents the annual Halloween "Radio Hour," this year featuring two local ghost stories, on "RadioWest" with Doug Fabrizio on KUER FM 90 on Wednesday. The program broadcasts live at 11 a.m. and repeats at 7 p.m. For more information, go to www.planbtheatre.org.