

"If you don't want it printed, don't let it happen."

Aspen Daily News

Boulder-based performance troupe packs a picnic in bringing new theater to Willits

Thursday, August 19, 2021

By Megan Tackett, Aspen Daily News

Editor

The Catamounts has always done things differently. So when the pandemic collided with co-founder Amanda Berg Wilson's plans for the theater company's 10th-anniversary season plans, the group was perhaps more nimble than most and able to adapt.

For one, The Catamounts is a theater company based in Boulder, but it has no specific home base.

"Just 'The Catamounts,'" Berg Wilson said of the troupe's name. "I named us sort of the way people name a band because I always knew we were going to be more of an ensemble than a building."

Rather, "the cats," as she affectionately calls her colleagues, roam the Front Range, developing theater that pushes traditional boundaries of performance art but helps reimagine the breadth of use for a space. For instance, The Catamounts enjoys a meaningful relationship with the city of Westminster, Berg Wilson said, and the collaboration has spawned several performances for the public that likely otherwise



Two audience members lean in for a kiss during a 2018 performance of The Catamounts' "FEED: Simple" at Lone Hawk Farm in Longmont.

Courtesy of Michael Ensminger

would not have occurred.

"We're robust and professional but we have found that we work best when we're in partnerships. And we have a really great relationship with the city of Westminster in the Front Range and have now created three different pieces for some of their public spaces," she said. "And I think that partnerships in the arts can really be multiplication rather than addition."

So when her friend from high school called her up about bringing the troupe to the Roaring Fork Valley, it was an easy "yes." That friend was Ryan Honey, executive director of The Arts Campus at Willits, or TACAW. Even though Honey's

career later took him to Los Angeles, and Berg Wilson's to Chicago, the two met as teenagers in Boulder.

"We were in... I think we were in a production of 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' together — something like that!" Berg Wilson laughed. "I'm ashamed to say I don't know my high school plays as well as I should."

Now, valley audiences are in for a treat, literally. Berg Wilson visited the TACAW site and decided it was an excellent opportunity for The Catamounts to create an iteration of its "FEED" performance series, an immersive theater experience

in which audiences enjoy a four-course meal throughout the program.

“The great thing about ‘FEED’ is it’s an original program that we created — it’s part farm dinner, part outdoor theater,” Berg Wilson explained. “It’s just kind of a really cool hybrid of a farm dinner and theater is the best way to describe it.”

On Friday, TACAW will present The Catamounts’ newest version, “FEED: Picnic.”

“The audience is seated in our amphitheater and on the lawn, and then the actors move around us. So it really is a picnic vibe,” Honey said Wednesday. “The actors move in and around you. They’re all about site-specific, immersive experiences — taking away the idea of, ‘You sit in the dark and we perform for you.’ The audience is very much integrated into the show.”

As for the theme of the evening, Berg Wilson opted to go a level deeper than literal picnics.

“The evening, the way that we curated it, rather than being really literal and doing all performance pieces about picnicking and outdoors and Americana, we’re making the evening about the way we discover things and the way that things reveal themselves,” she said.

Even the picnic format itself came to Berg Wilson through unexpected inspiration, but turned out to be uniquely well

suited for the not-quite-post pandemic times.

“Normally, we do a lot of service — each course is served — but because of the pandemic, I have just been thinking for awhile, what are the sort of baby steps back into performance so folks can still — no more Zoom theater — but then how can we still honor the fact that people might feel a little nervous about somebody leaning over them 20 times over the course of the night filling up their water glass and bringing their food and clearing their plate?” she recalled.

Then her colleague brought to her attention a New York Times lifestyle article.

“She was like you have to read this New York Times article ... picnicking is the thing since it’s outdoors. And I thought, ‘Oh gosh, that would make a great FEED.’ We can still have four courses, we can still curate it, but we can make it so we’re not dealing with the up-and-close-personal of having service throughout the course of an evening,” Berg Wilson said.

Honey, for his part, is thrilled about Friday’s performance, from 7-9 p.m. For one thing, it’s exactly the kind of bespoke programming he wants to bring to Willits. For another, it’s just another opportunity to continue an almost-lifetime friendship — and now not only between Honey and Berg Wilson, but between their two

organizations.

“This was a one-off,” he said of the Friday event, “but we have such a diverse space that is so flexible that we really wanted to have a long-lasting partnership with them so they feel free to create for any of our spaces.”

Berg Wilson shares her friend’s enthusiasm.

“Especially with something like TACAW, they’re not creating their own work, but they have a space ... and we don’t have a space, but we’re a very mobile organization. We know how to come into a space and very quickly make it into our own,” she said. “And I just have such immense respect for what Ryan’s doing. Bringing artists to a mountain community, you make the place as vibrant as you can possibly make it. When it’s a beautiful place and it has great places to eat and has great things to do, the arts becomes that puzzle piece that really completes the picture.”

Tickets are \$125 and include the four-course meal. More information is available at tacaw.org/calendar/feed-picnic.