

FREESTYLE

DAILY MESSENGER

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Messenger Post
photos by
Emily McElligott

Frank Irace, standing, director of the Impact Theater group, discusses a scene from a play called, "You Do The Crime" earlier this month with members of the Christian-oriented theater group. The group meets monthly in Palmyra.

Making an Impact

The Palmyra-based Impact Theater displays its Christian message through performance.

By AMY KOTLARZ
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PALMYRA — About a dozen actors sit on the stage at the Palmyra Town Hall, talking about what made them volunteer with the non-profit Impact Theater.

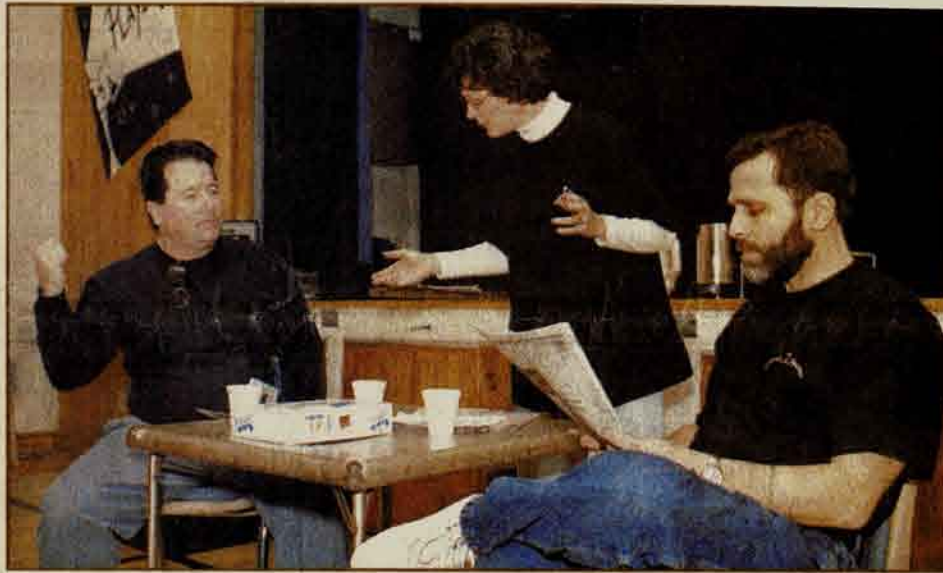
Over the stage, a basketball net hangs idle; and under their feet, hardwood floors gleam. Though they are relaxed and joking now, they will soon be focused on making their scenes flawless for an upcoming performance.

But first, the actors show how they differ from many other community theater groups: They bow their heads and pray that they will use their talents to glorify God.

The aim of Impact Theater, a Christian performing arts group, is to show audience members hard-hitting sketches designed to shed light on their lives and souls.

'For the love of it'

The three-year-old ministry draws nearly 100 people to the Town Hall, at 1180 Canandaigua Road (Route 21), for monthly performances of music and drama. The group's next all-drama performance will be at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Feb. 28. There is no charge for the performance, and all the



Above, "In Your Face Players" John Rice, left, Debbie Honness and Bob Bittner rehearse as part of the Impact Theater group. In the photo at left, Chris Stupin, left, rehearses a scene with Bittner. The group performs its skits for the public free of charge.

actors are volunteers.

"I think all of them want to do it for the love of it," said Frank Irace of Palmyra, theatrical director and founder of Impact Theater.

Despite its volunteer nature, the troupe runs itself like a professional company, Irace said. All actors are expected to have rehearsed their parts prior to the troupe's Friday night rehearsals. In addition to the regularly scheduled performances, the group also travels to local churches to perform.

While Irace writes all the scripts, his wife, AnnMarie Irace, makes the refreshments, including cookies and coffee. She also sets up the tables for the audience, narrates some of the skits and serves as a greeter before the performance. But she didn't come from a theatrical background.

"I never thought to do anything with theater," said AnnMarie, a native of Irondequoit.

It was her husband's idea to start Impact Theater, which grew out of his ministry to young people seven years ago. Frank Irace had been the youth director at Oasis of Hope in Palmyra, which at the time was called the Palmyra Assembly of God church.

"I started to incorporate drama into Sunday lessons, and it really took off with the teenagers," Frank Irace said.

Later, the drama was expanded into a coffee-house setting with productions once a year.

"We began to notice that it became very successful, and I had a desire to try to bring the arts into Wayne County," Frank Irace said. He said people in Wayne County often have to travel elsewhere to experience artistic performances.

"It's nice for a change that people are coming here from Rochester," he said.

While he was growing up in Harlem, Irace frequently went to Broadway productions.

"God just put it into my head to start a theater for performing arts for Christians," he said.

Irace said people have a stigma about Christian arts versus other types of performing arts. He said performing arts are simply someone's philosophy.

"There are artists who are Christian, and there's Christian art," Irace said. "We do some of both."

Vignettes of life

During a recent rehearsal, the group stays focused on creating their stories on stage. The acting starts with pantomime combined with narration, then shifts seamlessly to the characters speaking and acting on stage.

Irace begins a scene by narrating a commentary on an old brown dog, with a coat like a dirty oil rag, who has been cast aside and forgotten. The narrator, a jogger who is upset that the dog is in his way on the jog, is reminded of the homeless people his father used to bring home for holiday dinners.

The scene shifts to a family dinner, where four actors play the son, parents and a homeless man named Ray. During the scene, the son yells at his father for allowing strangers to barge in on their family dinners.

The scene shifts back to Irace's narration, which gives the point of the vignette:

"It happens with street dogs, and it happens with people."

In another scene, two churchgoers are picking up a cake for a surprise party in a poverty-stricken neighborhood. One of the churchgoers reveals his deep prejudice by making off-color remarks about people in the neighborhood, including the Hispanic owner of the bakery.

In the midst of rehearsing this sketch, the actors onstage begin debating how thick a Hispanic accent the bakery owner should have. One of the actors comments flippantly that the baker should be wearing a sombrero.

"This is why I wrote this," Irace says with an exasperated sigh. "He's Puerto Rican, not Mexican."

From the crowd to the stage

Crew member Bobby Guyette of Palmyra stayed after a performance one night to help the actors tear down the set, and he became a permanent member of the crew.

Guyette helps Frank Irace set up for the performance, starting 4 1/2 hours before the show begins.

"It's a lot of fun," Guyette said.

Diane Roof of Palmyra said prayer helped her get through her first performance with the

group last month.

"Deep breaths and prayer," she said. "Prayer for peace and that the words would come out clear and I would get the message across."

Roof said she had first come to an Impact Theater performance as a guest, having been friends with the Iraces for years. She is not the only one who went from audience member to participant.

"Last March I came to a performance, and I was moved deeply by the music," said Bob Bittner of Palmyra.

Bittner, who had done some community theater in the past, then volunteered to act with the company.

Lisa Downey of Lyons just joined the company after having seen many of its performances over the years. She said she was very moved by some of the cast performances.

"It was a lot of issues that you deal with every day," Downey said. "It might be commonplace things. There has been a sketch about abortion and abuse and about everyday issues and God."

John Rice of Rochester is another new cast member who has been to many Impact Theater performances over the years.

"It's a cut above the usual Christian entertainment that you get," Rice said. "Usually what you get is a coffeehouse and some sort of music."

Rice, who plays guitar and sings, said that as a performer, he appreciates an environment where the audience isn't talking during a performance.

Other cast members include Debbie Honness of Newark; Chris Stupin of Palmyra, who is also in charge of props and stage directions; and Jason Merrill of Canandaigua, who also designs Web sites. Both Stupin and Merrill started seven years ago helping Irace with Christian entertainment.

Irace said he is grateful for all the help of his volunteers.

"People put their heart into community theater," Irace said. "It's beautiful."

Reservations are suggested for Impact Theater performances; call (315) 597-3553 and wait for prompt; or see www.impactdrama.com.



Messenger Post photo by Emily McElligott

Frank Irace gives direction to the Impact Theater group, which performs this Friday in Palmyra.