

Reveling in Solstice Celebration Dance, song and theater highlight 25th Christmas Revels.

By Greg Wyshynski
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When asked to describe The Christmas Revels, executive director Greg Lewis said. "It's a fully staged celebration of the winter solstice, with music, dance and drama from different cultures and eras."

"That would be the most pithy [answer]," he continued, with a laugh. "It's notoriously difficult to describe Revels because it's not like anything else; in comparison to musical theater, or in comparison with typical theater."

This is the 25th edition of the holiday show for the Washington Revels, a non-profit institution dedicated to reviving and celebrating cultural traditions — music, dance, stories, drama and ritual— that have bound communities together over the ages and around the world. The Revels present large-scale shows while also using entertainment to education about world cultures and history in the community.

Developed by founder John Langstaff in 1957, whose concept spread to 11 American cities, the Revels' theatrical approach involves song, dance, drama and some entertaining audience participation. Lewis said hundreds of people join the cast in a group dance during shows; a dance that can spill into the aisles, the lobby and "if it's warm, in the streets," he said.

It's that sense of shared celebration that Lewis said has helped make the Christmas Revels one of the most popular holiday theatrical shows of the winter season. This year's edition, which features the colorful Renaissance world of Shakespeare and Queen Elizabeth I, takes place over the course of eight performances and two weekends.

"It's the sense of being part of something larger. It's not just Christmas carols. It's very different when you feel like you're part of something larger coming together in celebration of the dying of the year and the bringing back of the light," said Lewis. "To be part of that community, time after time, creates an entirely different feel. Plus, the shows are just fun."

THE REVELS are a combination of professional and non-professional performers from around the D.C. area and Northern Virginia, including Arlington, Alexandria and Fairfax County. Each Christmas Revels is themed to a certain era or genre. "This year, it's Elizabethan English," said Lewis. "Last year, it was America in the middle of the 1800s, with more themes than we usually hit in the Revels."

The "plot" for this year's show, according to Debbie Grossman of the Revels, centers around Will Kemp, a comedian from Shakespeare's company, attempting to delight the Queen during her Winter Solstice "Progress" across England.

For those who are attending the show for the first time, Lewis said the best advice is to "come early and read the program. This year, because it's the 25th annual, has more stuff in it than usual."

The Christmas Revels began in Washington back in 1983 with just three performances. Lewis, who has been executive director for over two years, has been a part of the organization with his wife since it started. By 1996, the shows had grown to six performances. "It was a killer," said Lewis. Now, the show has increased to eight shows over two weekends.

"There are lots and lots of organizations that use traditional material, but it's their own. Revels is unique in the sense that it focuses on material celebrating the winter solstice that takes people across cultural divides. It's a creation of community that's really timeless," said Lewis.

LOCALS INVOLVED in the Christmas Revels include Kat Cole of Alexandria in the adult chorus and Charlie Sullivan of Alexandria in the teen chorus; Revels' music director and soloist, Elizabeth Fulford Miller, lives in Alexandria, as does assistant music director Melissa Carter, props manager Betsy Ware, milliner Emily Deere, and merchandise manager Carrie Kovar Boris. Arlington is represented with Andrea Blackford, Steven Miller, Elisabeth Myers, and John Pomeranz in the adult chorus, and Caroline Birasa and Ben Names in the teen chorus. Offstage Arlington residents include make-up crew co-captains Lisa Grosh and Kristin Moore, props manager Don Names (Ben's dad!), and volunteer coordinator Erin Schwartz. The Revels' Queen Elizabeth, Katrina Van Duyn, is also from Arlington. Also in the adult chorus are Gillian Penn and Marc Lewis of Fairfax; Claudia Dulmage of Falls Church; Scott Matheson of McLean, and Dick Kovar of Reston. Grace Vander Veer of Fairfax is in the teen chorus and Katie Noone of McLean is in the children's chorus. The Vienna contingent includes Joanna Franco, Marissa Maley, and Louis Silvano in the adult chorus and Katie Somers in the teen chorus.

Where & When

The 2007 Christmas Revels, the 25th annual edition, will be held at the Lisner Auditorium, located on the campus of The George Washington University at 21st and H Streets, NW.

Showtimes are: Sat. Dec 8, 2 p.m.; Sat. Dec 8, 7:30 p.m.; Sun. Dec 9, 1 p.m.; Sun. Dec 9, 5:p.m.; Fri. Dec 14, 7:30 p.m.; Sat. Dec 15, 2 p.m.; Sat. Dec 15, 7:30 p.m.; and Sun. Dec 16, 2 p.m.

Tickets are Orchestra A-N: Adult \$40, Youth \$22; Terrace AA-JJ: Adult \$40, Youth \$22; Terrace KK-RR: Adult \$27, Youth \$16; Terrace SS-UU: Adult \$18, Youth \$12; Wheelchair Spaces (Row N) Adult \$40, Youth \$22.

Visit www.revelsdc.org for more information.

