

## Front Row Players

INCLUSIVE THEATER GROUP PUTS EVERYONE FRONT AND CENTER

Jason Klaber



Coming from all over the area to audition, the performers in Front Row Players' casts all get to have their moment in the spotlight. Returning members are given first dibs at joining every semester right after Labor Day before the group opens registration for any additional spots to the wider public.

As it prepares to stage its fall musical, an all-inclusive theater group is making certain that everyone in its cast is given the chance to flaunt their talents, those with physical, intellectual and other developmental disabilities very much included.

In fact, the group grew out of founder Deborah Cavanagh's desire to find another acting outlet for her daughter Amanda, who, with her friend Ellie Knodel, had been told she was too old to participate in a community theater program meant for kindergarteners through high schoolers.

"They would get together and act out the scenes with costumes, and they kept all the music from their previous shows," Deborah said. "It was a huge part of their lives, and now it was going to be gone."

From that motherly instinct to step in and support her daughter during a trying time, there evolved an idea: why not create her own outlet, she thought, one that would give the spotlight to her daughter and other adults with special needs so they wouldn't be relegated to the back of the ensemble or outright turned away from performing onstage. Thus the Front Row Players were born, with an emphasis on providing actors of all abilities the opportunity to be right out front and visible and providing meaningful, prominent roles in the productions.

The group pulled off a pilot semester in the fall of 2016 with a dozen or so actors who caught onto it by word of mouth, all of them with disabilities to some degree, though not a single thing was limiting their love for theater.

After getting set up as a 501(c)(3), Front Row Players put on its first public show, a free-admission cabaret-style performance that brought in upwards of 250 attendees. Deborah and business manager for the organization Christine Byrnes sensed the magic in the air and saw the tears of joy welling up in peoples' eyes, and at that point, they knew they had to keep Front Row Players going.

"Here we are 12 shows later working on our 13th performance, and we have 39 actors, a fully robust creative team and production people," Christine said.

That 13th performance will be "A Dickens of a Christmas," a musical written by area native Pat Lotito and Ken Prescott that debuted at Syracuse's Salt City Center for the Performing Arts, where the former of the two was music director.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of that holiday production's debut, and for its revival by Front Row Players Dec. 7 and 8, some of the original folks from Salt City will be in the show supporting the leads alongside other thespians from the community being brought in to fill roles as roaming wassailers.

The show's basic story will be familiar to many, as it draws from Charles Dickens' 1843 novella "A Christmas Carol" and its tale of Ebenezer Scrooge being visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future as well as that of his business partner Jacob Marley, but the music is all unique to the local production and much of the dialogue is too.

As with other Front Row productions in recent years, the performances will take place at Temple Adath Yesburun at 450 Kimber Road in DeWitt, the site the group has called home thanks to a board member's affiliation with the synagogue. Deborah, an East Syracuse resident, said that temple tends to have more availability as a performing venue than local high schools, which often have their stages booked during the school year.

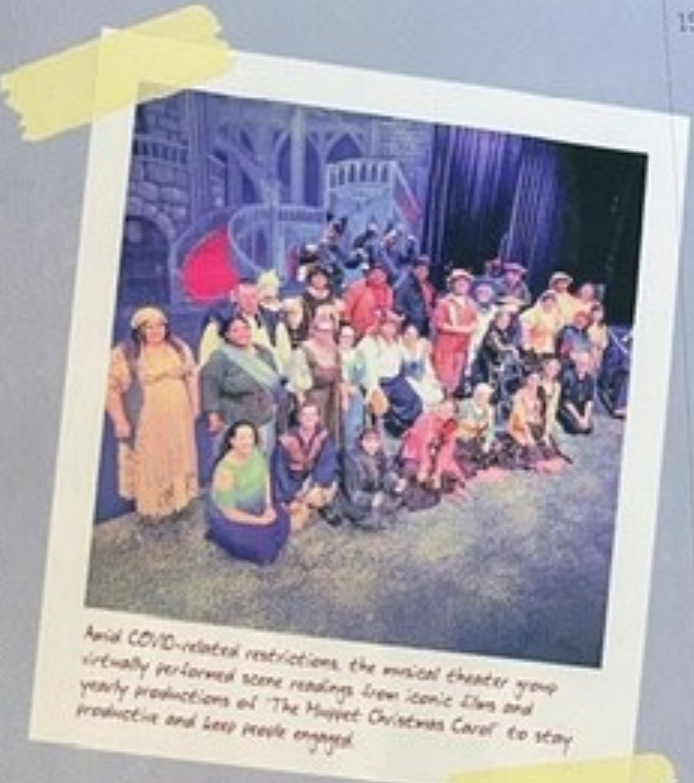
The showtimes for Front Row Players' performances of "A Dickens of a Christmas" this fall will be Saturday, Dec. 7 at 7 p.m. and the following afternoon of Sunday, Dec. 8 at 2 p.m.

For the full-scale musical — Front Row Players' first that isn't an abridged junior version — the cast of 39 will be the biggest the group has ever boasted, encompassing an age range from 19 to someone in their fifties with the exception of the child playing Tiny Tim, as well as people displaying varying levels of verbal communication and mobility.

Front Row Players is largely women-led. That includes not only Deborah as the president and Christine as the business manager, but also Shannon Tompkins as the artistic director and choreographer, Liverpool Central School District educator Shayne Knight as music director, Fairmount resident Chris Ecker as stage manager, Jamesville-DeWitt grad Hali Greenhouse as producer, and Andrea Calarco as the costumer responsible for this upcoming show's flowing dresses and period-specific coats.

Shannon, who has been with Front Row Players since the beginning, is the one who picks which shows the group does season to season, all the while working to make the cast a constellation of shining stars by finding every member their perfect part and bringing out their best.

With experience directing shows for J-D High School, the Baldwinsville Theatre Guild, CNY Playhouse, Appleseed Productions and The Wit's End Players to add to her credits, Shannon also portrayed the Ghost of Christmas Past in the Salt City Center's successful production of the Dickens offshoot through the later half of the 1990s in addition to handling the choreography. To this day the holiday musical remains near and dear to her heart as one of her favorite musicals she's been a part of, and so she relishes the opportunity to revive it,



Amid COVID-related restrictions, the musical theater group virtually performed scene readings from iconic films and yearly productions of "The Muppet Christmas Carol" to stay productive and keep people engaged.

whether theatergoers are being introduced to it or reminded of their experience seeing it during the '90s run.

Music director Shayne said Front Row's acting group this semester is "wonderful" and talented, with none possessing the slightest ego or hint of cruelty, while Shannon said they always keep her on her toes and laughing.

Chris, the stage manager, who was a mentor for Deborah's daughter Amanda before stage managing ever crossed her mind.

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The group puts on two musicals a year, one in the fall and one in the spring or early summer.



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seconded those notions, saying, "I have never seen a group of people pull together so quickly, and they all mesh really well. Everybody includes everyone else — they all help each other and they're quick learners too."

Shayne also said she appreciates that the upbeat, catchy music in the show was all composed by Syracuse's own Pat Lotito, though it does present a challenge that there's no cast recording she's come across that she could pop on at any given moment and rely on as a template.

To continue operating year after year, the non-profit Front Row Players organization is reliant on corporate sponsors, grants, a performance-based fundraiser set for the month of April and individual community donations to offset its expenses.

Christine, a Manlius resident, who gets the shows in order on the back end with Deborah and also has a daughter with special needs, said she's thankful for the ever-growing support from audiences since the inception of Front Row Players in terms of their attendance, their embracing of the actors, and their appreciation of what the cast is able to do rather than what they can't.

"People who've come to a show for the first time might have a pre-conceived notion of what they're going to see onstage," Deborah said. "Then when they actually see the show, all thought of disability disappears because what the actors are able to do onstage blows them away and draws them in. We change perception with every performance." None of it would be possible without the right professionals in place, patient actors, costume change assistance courtesy of personal support people, everyone's time commitment to the program, and a shared willingness to come together and make it all work, she said.

Featuring all the clapping, singing and toe tapping anyone could want, the theater group's Saturday rehearsals for the Dickens show have been held in the all-purpose cafeteria of Immaculate Conception Church in Fayetteville.

The December shows will be dedicated to the late Bill Molesky, who played Scrooge in the Salt City Center's version with all the cutting



The mission of Front Row Players is to provide a true theatrical experience for its actors, many of whom have special needs, and to show what is possible as opposed to what isn't.

wit he could muster, as well as the memories and legacies of Lotito and the original Christmas Present Robert "Tank" Steingraber, a man with big shoes to fill who was light on his feet.

Tickets to Front Row Players' evening and matinee performances of "A Dickens of a Christmas" are available through [frontrowplayers.org](http://frontrowplayers.org). *SM*

This fall's show, "A Dickens of a Christmas," will make its way to the stage of Temple Adath Yeshurun Dec. 7 and 8. Past Front Row Players shows have included "The Wizard of Oz," "Beauty and the Beast" and "Sweeney."

