

May 2007

## EXPLORING KENTUCKY

### Star-Studded Sleuthing

Owensboro prepares to host the first International Mystery Writers Festival

By Katherine Tandy Brown



Award-winning producer Zev Buffman, now president and CEO of Owensboro's RiverPark Centre, teamed up with long-time friend and acclaimed actress Angela Lansbury to launch a new event to showcase original mystery works.

Until 10 or 12 years ago, stage mysteries made up 30 percent of Broadway productions in New York City and 40 percent of the average London theater diet. At that time, though mystery novels remained a strong corner of the publication market, theater productions began to disappear.

Concerned, "Murder She Wrote" star Angela Lansbury and veteran Broadway producer Zev Buffman addressed the issue over lunch. They realized that Hollywood was moving mystery writers to the West Coast and burning them up writing programs like "Law and Order" and "CSI," and the stage was suffering for it.

What if, the good friends wondered, they began a mystery writers' festival and invited both established and new mystery writers to submit stage and screenplays in a competition for decent prize money?

Though that lunch transpired a number of years ago, Buffman, with more than 40 plays and musicals and 27 Tony nominations to his credit, brought the idea with him in 2003 when he accepted the position of president and CEO of Owensboro's RiverPark Center (RPC). This summer, from June 12 through 17, the first International Mystery Writers Festival, "Discovering New Mysteries," will come to fruition at RiverPark Center, a state-of-the-art performing arts venue. RPC's most ambitious project to date, the event is amazingly multi-faceted, highlighted by live world theater premieres of 12 original mystery works. And the audience gets to choose the eventual winner.

"The weight of bringing together the production of 12 plays all at once became huge," Buffman admitted, "but I'm a project junkie. The response has been wonderful all around, and we're all on an 18/7 schedule."

A couple of years ago, he announced the contest to agents, publishers and managers of mystery writers, mystery writers' clubs and major novelists. Readers from top literary agencies then reviewed some 1,000 submissions, honing the list to 36 semi-finalists before judges selected a dozen for festival presentation by Broadway pros - directors, producers, actors and stage crews.

Ranging from famous authors to rookies, the authors of those top works include William Link, winner of two Emmys, an Edgar and a Golden Globe. The creator of numerous television series classics, such as Peter Falk's "Colombo" and Angela Lansbury's "Murder She Wrote," Link will present a first-time stage version of his beloved trench-coated Columbo character.

An unseen play by Mystery Writers of America Lifetime Achievement Award winner Ed McBain will be staged posthumously. And Kentuckian Elizabeth Orndorff surprises with her first stage play.

"What could be better in Kentucky," Buffman said, "than to have a Danville resident who's never written a full-length play before beat out the competition with a thriller that takes place in the Star

## Chamber of Mammoth Cave?"

Angela Lansbury is still affiliated with the project and lends her name to eight awards, including best play, screenplay, new work, actor and director. The chosen six plays and six screenplays will vie for hefty prizes of \$10,000 for the winner, \$5,000 for second place and \$2,500, third. The "Angies" will be given at Sunday's closing Gala Awards Ceremony.

To fund the festival, the state House and Senate approved \$500,000 to be used over two years, and Owensboro and Daviess County added \$50,000. The rest, to make up a \$700,000 budget, came from the private sector.

"That's a massive amount of money, considering RPC's total budget this year would usually be \$2 million," Buffman said.

Kentucky Educational Television (KET) will even film a documentary of the event. "The economic impact of a Broadway show has been calculated at about \$3.5 million per show for the community," said Travis Estes, sales and marketing director for RiverPark Center. "That includes hotel rooms, restaurants and set construction labor each time a show opens. The festival is great for the community, great for the center."

In addition to live productions, the event features free classic mystery film showings nightly under the stars on a giant screen on a patio overlooking the Ohio; an auction of first editions and plays, including original "Colombo" and "Murder She Wrote" scripts; and book signings by mystery writers of current best-sellers and backlist novels.

Festival headquarters are housed in multi-theater RPC, a non-profit regional performing arts center that includes the 1,500-seat Cannon Hall, the 300-seat Jody Berry Cabaret Theatre, and two other stages, one of which adjoins the International Bluegrass Music Museum. Other play venues will be throughout downtown.

"It's almost as if the plays were written for the venues in which they'll be performed," Estes said. "'Elizabeth Orndorff's 'Death by Darkness' will be in our black box theater. It's a smaller, dark room with an aura of mystery. 'Widdershins' has a Gothic feel and will be in the Trinity Center at Theatre Workshop of Owensboro (TWO), which has interior Gothic beams."

Many of the screenplay readings will be at the museum's Wendell Ford Senate Gallery and will be produced like old radio mysteries, with a cast of 10 or 12 readers, live audiences, background music and sound effects presented by the award-winning director/producer team of David Ossman and Judith Walcutt.

Top names in contemporary literature, theater and film make up the festival's impressively credentialed executive committee, which helped select the dozen finalists.

Founding members include Blake Edwards, author of nine "Pink Panther" mystery-comedies starring Peter Sellers; Louisville's Sue Grafton, author of the wildly-popular "Alphabet Series" mystery novels; Ira Levin, who penned "Rosemary's Baby" and "Deathtrap," the longest-running comedy-thriller on Broadway; Robert (Bob) Levinson, a winner of the Ellery Queen Readers Award for three consecutive years; Stuart Kaminsky, current Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America and winner of an Edgar for best mystery novel; and Hopkinsville native James W. Hall, winner of this year's Edgar award for best short story. Most will hold free master classes during the festival.

For mystery aficionados, festival attendance is a total win-win - rubbing elbows with big names in theater and the whodunit world, seeing onstage sleuthing, attending master classes led by some of the best mystery writers in the business, dropping in on cast parties and helping select the final winners of both stage and screenplay categories.

"There's so little in this world that's truly unique," said Kaminsky, who serves as festival co-chair, "but this event comes close. And in my book, it has everything to do with the energy and

commitment of Zev Buffman. I was somewhat skeptical when he first approached me about it, but he's made it happen with a marvelous lineup of plays and workshops and a terrific board and judges.

"There are plenty of venues for those of us who write mystery novels, but mystery theater is another story. This festival has put up a lot of well-deserved money for playwrights and screenwriters, and I hope it continues for years to come."

*Katherine Tandy Brown ([editorial@lanereport.com](mailto:editorial@lanereport.com)) is a staff writer for The Lane Report.*