

The Last Train to Dry Gulch

Murder, mayhem, robbery and kidnapping – all to benefit the Literacy Council of Madison County and the Madison County Library.

Danger and criminality will be around every corner beginning at 6 p.m. Saturday, June 9, at Madison County High School, during what is basically a mystery dinner theater play “The Last Train to Dry Gulch.” It’ll be a rollicking, fun evening involving local actors, a catered dinner and lots of guessing about perpetrators and motives.

The play does indeed revolve around a train journey, taking people to various destinations—for Robert and Beatrice Pendleton, it’s a trip to examine their inheritance, the railroad itself, and for old-maid sisters Hattie and Hester, it’s an eager foray west in hopes of catching a man in that female-scarce area. There’s also a gang with questionable motives, both a Tambourine Lady and a Church Lady, and a snake oil salesman. To help sort things out, there are both a detective and a sheriff.

The audience doesn’t just sit there and watch and laugh. All members have the heavy responsibility of ferreting out clues as the tale unfolds, because the sheriff and detective need all the help they can get. Lots of hints are given along the way, and before the big unveiling everyone can write down their own suspects for the murder, kidnapping etc. Those who get two out of three answers right are entered in a drawing, plus they get bragging rights.

There are Madison roots and connections from end to end of this opus. The playwright is Shirley Workman, Senior Center Administrator and operator of Countryside Assisted Living at Pratts, and it’s a “BS” Production Company project. (BS bills itself as “little talent, lots of imagination” and the S is for Shirley and the B is for frequently-seen local actor Bob Slaven.) Shirley is also a standup comic who bills her act as “Sexy, Sassy and Seventy-Three.”

BS began some years ago with a mystery dinner theater production called “The Mystery of Merryville,” and the first play written by Workman was about a kidnapped pig at the Virginia State Fair. These narratives were based on the local folk who were moved from the Blue Ridge to make way for Shenandoah National Park. Those people were given little choice in the move; among them were members of Shirley Workman’s family, so she writes with some authority.

After the series of park-related plays, Shirley has moved on to write and act in others, with a total of six now to her credit. She has worked with Madison’s other stellar local playwright, Jim Jewett, as well as with regular actor Slaven. One production even featured a live pig. Benefiting in the past, besides the fair, have been the rescue squad and the historical society. In fact, about 400 people turned out for the event at the high school on behalf of the rescue squad.

The “Dry Gulch” event is a dinner theater only if those who attend want it to be. Tickets are \$20 each, and for an extra \$10 at the door theater-goers can add a meal prepared by Rappahannock-Rapidan Community Services CK (Central Kitchen) Catering. There’s a choice of a hot or cold dinner for the occasion, boxed and ready to save time so the plot can continue to unroll.

But dining is a small part of this exciting evening. Who stole the jewels? Why is Beatrice Pendleton so miserable? What lengths will Hattie and Hester go to in order to trap someone so they can finally wed? Should you trust a snake oil salesman? (Well, probably not.)

Madison roots also describes many of the actors, some with older roots than others. Cast members are narrator—Maxwell Lacy; Robert Pendleton—Bob Slaven; Beatrice Pendleton—Judy Butler; station master—Ken Carpenter; train engineer—Marc Flieschmann; train porter—Scotty Mallory; Hattie—Shirley Workman; Hester—Tania Thomas; Mary, the younger sister from the Henson Gang—Anne Nicholson; the brother, Johnny, from the Henson Gang—Johnny Thomas; Sal, the Henson older sister—Margie Blankenship; the father—Roman Pizsmont; the daughter—Willow Rudolph; the son—Waylon Rudolph; the sheriff—Jerry Butler; Pinkerton detective—Hank Utz; William T. Barnes, the snake oil salesman himself—Sydney Tanner; the preacher (you gotta have a preacher)—Richard Grendahl; the Tambourine Lady—Tara Cardinal; and the Church Lady—Becca Pizsmont.

For tickets and dinner reservations, call 948-4131 or the literacy council at 948-5514.