



Finding roots onstage: Montclair's Penny Paul is at home at NLT



Tibby McCullough (Penny Paul) and Hank Hadley (Frank Blaeuer) observe Spencer McCullough (Brittany Haydock) as she panics over her wedding. Courtesy Nutley Little Theatre.

'Regrets Only'

By Paul Rudnick

June 9-24

NLT Barn, 47 Erie Place, Nutley

nutleylittletheatre.com

By GWEN OREL

orel@montclairlocal.news

Growing up in New York City, Penny Paul never even knew there was such a thing as community theater.

"It was Broadway or nothing," said the blonde leading lady, sipping a cold drink on the porch of her Montclair home. Paul is appearing in "Regrets Only," by Paul Rudnick, at Nutley Little Theatre, which runs from June 9 through the 24th.

After graduating from Yale, studying English and theater, Paul went to Los Angeles to pursue work on-screen.

Eventually she returned east for law school.

“When I settled, I was amazed at how many opportunities there were to do theater,” she said. She did some ushering at Montclair’s Studio Playhouse and tried out in 1999 for an NLT production of “Drop Dead!” by Billy Van Zandt and Jane Milmore. Van Zandt, Paul explained, is the brother of Steve Van Zandt, the rocker.

Being cast on her first audition “was thrilling!” Paul said.

Since then she’s done at least 10 shows at NLT. Ten years ago she began directing, and she has also served on NLT’s board.

In “Regrets Only,” Paul plays Tibby, the socialite wife of a high-powered attorney, whose daughter is getting married. Tibby’s best friend is a gay fashion designer, and her husband is working on a bill that would define marriage as between heterosexuals only.

So the friend helps lead a strike of gay people, the day before the wedding.

The show dates from 2006, during the George W. Bush era.

“The director who chose the show was concerned it might be dated. That was before the election,” Paul said with a laugh. “The jokes apply today.”

Next year, NLT will have its 80th anniversary, she said. Like Studio Players, NLT has its own space, which is unusual for community theater troupes.

“There’s a sense of place and history,” she said. The space is small and intimate: not even actors get comps [complimentary tickets]. The season always includes a musical, a crowdpleaser, and something more cutting edge as well.

“I’m really impressed by the level of talent,” Paul said. “Most people understand it won’t lead to a career on Broadway. They are doing it for the love of it.” The passion and commitment are there from people who’ve never acted before, to the people who build the sets, to people who perform in show after show: “It’s amazing.”

Becoming a regular with NLT has also helped root her to Montclair and its environs, she said. Now that her children are in their 20s, she doesn’t necessarily have her kids’ friends’ parents for friends. “I have more in common with other theater people. It’s why I’ve grown such deep roots in the area.”

In “Regrets Only,” the actors laugh constantly at Rudnick’s jokes — but the timing of his set-ups and punchlines must be precise “for the jokes to sing,” she said. Snapping for emphasis, she explained that there might be five people on stage, and “if someone drops a line, others jump in. It’s cohesion. It’s a well-oiled machine.”

She loves that Tibby changes during the play: “She develops a social conscience. She puts her foot down.”

And she tells her husband to lay off the bill not only because her daughter's wedding can't go forward, but because it's the right thing to do, she said. "She's sort of flighty at the beginning. She didn't realize her friend was not always treated equally. She's forced to take a stand." The play is about friendship, and about respect. "I just love it so much."

Paul said she hopes people will realize that seeing a show at NLT is "easier than going to the city and spending hundreds on a Broadway play."

"It's a fun night out."