

# Community delivers theater to school kids

## Local companies, school district pay so 5,000 students will see Romeo & Juliet

BY NANCY STETSON

Florida Weekly Correspondent

It may take a village to raise a child, but it takes a community to raise a production.

Bob Cacioppo, producing artistic director of the Florida Repertory Theatre, wanted to produce a classical play each year. And he wanted to present the shows free to local high school students. But he knew he couldn't do it without the support — financial and otherwise — of the community.

He first went to Superintendent James Browder and told him he wanted to bring high school students to his theater to see a professional production of "Romeo and Juliet," which is required reading for the teens.

Browder thought it was a great idea and agreed to supply free bus transportation to and from the theater. When learning that Cacioppo planned on giving a dozen performances for high schoolers, Browder said, "Great! There are 12 high schools in Lee County." That meant students from each high school could attend.

Then Cacioppo, along with some of his board members, met with Marshall Bower, executive director of the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools.

"I told him we needed \$100,000 to make this happen and asked, 'Do you think you can get us \$50,000?'"

A few days later, the board met and unanimously agreed to give \$50,000.

"There was one stipulation," Cacioppo says, "That we would try to target at-risk kids. Fantastic!"

That had been Cacioppo's plan. He wanted kids who had never seen a play before to see what live theater is all about. He knows that theater can change lives.

Then he approached Scott Edmonds, CEO and president of Chico's.

"We had support from Chico's Charities in the past," Cacioppo says. "Chico's made an additional large donation — enough to make me say, 'This program is a go.'"

With the Chico's World Classic Initiative, the Florida Repertory Theatre will produce one classical play every year, including free performances for Lee County high school students. This year, the play is the Classical Theatre of Harlem's production of "Romeo and Juliet" (currently on stage at the Rep). Cacioppo wants to produce other Shakespeare plays, such as "Julius Caesar," Greek classics such as "Medea" and "Lysistrada" and American classics such as "The Crucible" and "Death of a Salesman." And both he and the founders of the Classical Theatre of Harlem hope to forge a relationship that continues over the years.

"We hope this is a long-term relationship with them," says Chis McElroen, executive director and co-founder of the Classical Theatre of Harlem. "Maybe every other season we can come down and be a part of their World Classic Initiative. We're just excited to heighten the visibility of theater whose roots are in Harlem, to have a production of 'Romeo and Juliet' start in Harlem and travel down to Florida, to bring attention to the great work taking place in



COURTESY PHOTO

Robert Cacioppo

Harlem."

Twenty people from the company flew down to Fort Myers on Sunday.

"We were facing a minimal hotel bill of \$25,000," Cacioppo says. "But Phil Hugh of Holiday Inn downtown said 'We believe in this' and picked up the cost."

And Steve Pontius, executive vice president/general manager of Waterman Broadcasting, is running television ads for the play.

"We're obviously in uncertain financial times, but we're saying this is the first of many," Cacioppo says. "But with enough publicity and positive will, we could expand, do more performances."

And following his theater's mission to be accessible to the entire community, Cacioppo is offering two performances where attendees can pay what they can.

"Now we've started thinking of building the audience of the future," he says. "A 16- or 17-year old, maybe 10 years from now they'll be on my board of directors or a season subscriber or a donor. There used to be a lot of arts education in the schools, but now the private sector must be responsible for arts education."

Ticket sales only cover half their expenses, the other half comes from donations, Cacioppo says.

"It's been wonderful getting all this community spirit and help towards doing a project like this," he says. ■

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