

# Gretna Little Theatre says 'farewell' to founders

*"It is the heart of the historic district and we welcome old time residents and newcomers every week into the world of our make believe."*

*– Janina Shoemaker*

By **BOBBY ALLEN ROACH**

*Star-Tribune Assistant Editor*

10 years ago, a couple found their way to the Town of Gretna. At the time, they lived in Florida, but their hearts were leading them to Virginia.

"I wanted to live in the Blue Ridge Mountains since I was a child," said Janina Shoemaker. "We first looked at Roanoke, but found it too busy for us and then we discovered the Lynchburg, Gretna, Danville area."

She and her husband, Hal, decided that Gretna had the right "feel" for them.

"When we found the people here were so friendly, we were hooked," she said.

In April 2008, the pair founded Gretna Little Theatre.

"Our first meeting was in the Gretna Library with one person," Janina said. "We met again with one other person, and then we grew. We started rehearsing in the First Baptist Church basement and presented shows in the Gretna Movie Theatre. Our first show was 'If A Man Answers,' and we followed that with the operetta 'The Merry Widow.'"

Since then, the theatre has grown into its own space at 101 South Main Street and its black box theatre – an intimate concept designed for smaller audiences, closer to the action of the stage.

"I have always been involved in theatre and there was too much distance between Danville and Lynchburg or Bedford. We could attend theatre, but not participate at that distance. The solution was starting a theatre operation where we were living. Grow where you're planted. We soon found out that there were very talented people in the



Bobby Allen Roach/Star-Tribune

**Hal, left, and Janina Shoemaker, right, pose for a photo in the black box theatre of the Gretna Center for the Arts. The center represents nearly nine years of work by the duo and countless others in the Gretna area. The Shoemakers have decided to move back to Florida to enjoy their retirement.**

greater Gretna area: actors, dancers, singers, and musicians," Janina said. "GLT is an operational community theatre presenting a regular schedule of productions, plus workshop theatre for youth. It is thriving as a low-budget, shoestring theatre and we are drawing from a talent pool that stretches 30 minutes in all directions. We have been making steady improvements to the building since purchasing it from a local church. We have shored up the floors, taken out the old stage, added bleacher seating, installed a heat pump, a new roof, ice breakers, and gutters."

"The operation of the theatre itself is kept moving by the trust of several foundations, awarding us grants, and by the loyal patrons who come to see our work and bring friends," Janina said. "We can now look at a former derelict building that has new windows, doors, and roof right on Main Street. It is the heart of the historic district

and we welcome old time residents and newcomers every week into the world of our make believe."

Janina explained that she hopes the center will continue to grow even though she and Hal are returning to Florida.

"There is still much to be done," Janina said. "We would like to see the Center for the Arts continue to evolve and grow with building repairs, including an elevator and a third-story ballroom."

Janina shared that the center for the arts was not the original goal of the pair.

"We realized in year three that we had outgrown being a gypsy theatre, a theatre that rehearses here and there, and presents the show in a rented space. The Creasy mercantile was on the market, and with Gretna itching to revitalize Main Street, we took the chance in 2010. It was a long shot, and is still an expensive investment, but the investment is in the future of Gretna as the arts hub of

northern Pittsylvania County," she said.

Today, they prepare to return to Florida, but their legacy will remain in Gretna, a town forever changed by the presence of these patrons of the arts.

"We will be returning to Florida, the space coast, where I have family. Hal has difficulty with stairs, and our Florida home is on one floor," Janina said. "We also like the more clement weather year round. We will be 15 miles from the ocean and four miles from the river."

With their impending departure, the pair considered some of their favorite memories at the center and their hopes for its prosperous future.

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## Farewell

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“Every production has moments of achievement surpassing expectations. Watching an actor move out of the comfort zone and expand into a character is the goal of the director, and to have that happen in concert with a worthy script being produced in a small venue is a small moment of pride,” Janina said.

Hal said he enjoyed the shows he directed, especially when he was directing Janina.

He added that he also enjoyed his acting roles.

“I can only trust that the the-

atre will continue to draw interest from the entire community as children become adults, and adults find recreational activity well into their senior years. It is also an excellent way for the community to exercise diversity. We all have gifts, and theatre is an art form that calls for music, dance, design, and speaking ability. We would like to see the building we call ‘Gretna Center for the Arts’ improve and grow,”

Janina said. “We have a strong board of directors, persons who have found something worth-

while in this particular arts form, and who have a vested interest in providing theatre opportunities for our greater Gretna students.”

While preparing to say “good-bye” to Gretna, the Shoemakers said that they have been happy there. Hal has been involved with the Gretna American Legion and Lions Club and Janina has been active in the Thomas Carter Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.

“Gretna has been a welcoming village, welcoming both of us as well as the theatre. We have

seen the development of the Centra system and been part of the grassroots activity of it. And we have made many friends during the nine years of growing GLT,” Janina said. “We have seen so many youngsters (and others) grow from shy, reserved children into confident performing teens, during every summer workshop. In some cases, entire families become involved in the productions, making them truly “family productions.”

Janina has a graduate degree in theatre arts in addition to teaching

credentials in English and communication. She has taught at the college level since 1984 and has performed in theatres from New York to Florida. She is also a produced playwright, a news journalist, and a theatre critic.

Janina will direct her final show for the theatre, “Blithe Spirit,” in October.

Curtains will open for that show on October 21 at 7:30 p.m. For more information, visit [www.performgretna.com](http://www.performgretna.com).