

Heritage Hunt pioneers senior theatre—fast growing form of performing arts

By NANCY JOHNSON
Observer staff

Prince William County is rich in amateur music and theater, with community and high school theater productions playing regular schedules. Performing groups such as Prince William Little Theatre and Prince William Chorale welcome newcomers on stage and backstage. An exploration of what goes on behind the scenes of one of the newest theater groups reveals the many talents and the work by dedicated volunteers needed to produce a play.

When Bets Knepley moved to Heritage Hunt four years ago, she brought with her a love of theater and a desire to start a theater group in her community. Knepley says, "Senior theater, by, with, and for older adults, is one of the fastest growing forms of the performing arts."

The Heritage Hunt Little Theater began in 2003, and Knepley has directed four plays, and John Gatt and Alan Mager also have taken director reins. The performers and behind-the-scenes crew come from many walks of life, some retired, some still working. A few have participated in amateur theater previously; but for others, it is a new learning experience, enhanced by



The actors pose in costume on the "When in Rome" set.

acting classes at Northern Virginia Community College.

The musical farce, "When in Rome," was presented as a dinner theater event over four nights in early May at the Heritage Hunt Golf and Country Club. As with the other plays, it was a sold-out production,

Knepley appreciates the supportive audience at Heritage Hunt.

Each production begins with the director's presenting a play production packet to the play selection committee. Then the director orders scripts, scores, and production notes from the publisher.

Knepley started preparing for "When in Rome" by researching ancient Rome for costume and scenery ideas. She then met with the scenery crew and the costume and makeup volunteers to get the feel of the era. She used a scale model of the stage, built and designed by Alan Mager, to block each of the characters' moves.

Auditions were held in mid-January over a three-day period with director, stage managers, music director, and choreographer present.

"When in Rome," a musical comedy with dancing and singing, had 29 cast members, including some couples, and at least that many more worked behind the scenes.

Rehearsals started in late January, with meetings three and four times a week. The director needed to help each character find his "personality." She encouraged the cast to help one another on stage, used games

Courtesy photo

She believes, "It takes a village to produce a show." But only \$7 of the evening's cost goes to the theater to pay some of the production's expenses. Knepley says, "Our cast members have always had to pay for their own costumes and props in each of our seven productions."

Continued on SPARE TIME 12