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Sandra Hildreth: Our History In Art And Music

by Sandra Hildreth

2 Comments



To understand how America was made, one need only go back and look at what people created, their responses to the events and environments they lived in. There are currently two unique opportunities available that will take you back to other times in very different ways. Both are based on things that occurred around 60 years ago – one building on centuries of songs and the other forging a path into the world of contemporary art, ironically, going on at almost the same time.

A one time opportunity to learn about our past through the arts is a performance tonight, (July 14) of "RED", a Pendragon Theatre production that is making a one day tour to VIEW, in Old Forge. "RED", a Tony award winning play by John Logan, is a two-person performance that brings you into the 1950's world of Abstract Expressionism in New York City.

If you've ever looked at a work of modern art and said "a 3 year old kid could have painted that" – then you need to see this play. Photographer and actor Burdette Parks, one of my colleagues at the Adirondack Artists Guild, plays the lead role of painter Mark Rothko and he skillfully takes you deep into the mind of the artist. The rise of abstract art in the 40's and 50's did not occur because artists wanted to simplify things and get rid of subject matter – it developed because they were very seriously thinking about the complexity of creating art, exploring what it means, how it communicates what was going on in the post World War II environment.

Actor Tyler Nye plays Ken, Rothko's assistant, and through their dialogue and interaction the viewer is really transported back into one of the most dynamic times in the history of American art – a time that moved the "center of the art world" from Paris to New York. If unfamiliar with his work, it might help to google Mark Rothko before coming to see the play, but even without doing that, it is a very thought provoking performance.

VIEW is located at 3273 State Route 28 in Old Forge. The performance on July 14 is at 7:30 pm and reservations should probably be made by calling 315-369-6411. Pendragon Theatre is located in Saranac Lake – check out their online schedule for the rest of the summer's performances here.

Readers may recall that I was inspired to write about the "Songs to Keep" project back in July 2013. A joint project of Mountain Lake PBS, Traditional Arts in Upstate New York (TAUNY), SUNY Plattsburgh, and the Adirondack History Center Museum, it was described as "The story of a woman who traveled the Adirondacks collecting rare folk songs that are being rediscovered and rerecorded 60 years later." I urged



support for the Kickstarter funding campaign and it was successful. A CD was released consisting of songs originally recorded by Marjorie L. Porter and performed by contemporary Adirondack singer-songwriters and musicians. They also toured the region and did several live performances. Well, now Mountain Lake PBS has been honored with Emmy for their Adirondack Music Documentary.

"Porter is a hero for having captured these songs in the nick of time," said producer Paul Larson, when he accepted the award at the Boston/New England Regional Emmy Awards. "Without Porter's original foresight and hard work to preserve these treasures, we would have lost a lot of music and stories that originated in the Adirondacks. She never cared much for receiving awards for herself, but she would probably have been thrilled to know the songs she collected have received such a high honor."

The program includes musical performances from contemporary folk singers, who aim to revive Porter's songs. Performers included Dave Ruch, Lee Knight and Dan Berggren, who had all previously worked with Porter's collection in their own projects, and who helped Larson understand the historical significance of the folk songs. Larson invited the Bacon Brothers, Kevin and Michael, to record a song for the project, as they frequently visit their family camp in the Adirondacks. Peter Yarrow and Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul and Mary fame gave their insight into traditional music of the northeast. Larson was also able to speak with folk legend Pete Seeger, a conversation that became his official final television interview when the singer passed away in January of this year.

I went to the live performance at VIEW in Old Forge and I saw the documentary on PBS. The songs tell wonderful stories of the people who lived in the Adirondacks, lives lost in logging accidents, sailors, weddings, miners, and even Bert LaFountain's Packard. Stories and tales that were saved because they became songs passed from generation to generation. Paul Larson and PBS combined the music and stories with images, old recordings, and new performances. And now they've been passed on to us, a precious part of our history.

You can learn more here and if inspired enough to want to see the documentary, it can be purchased by clicking on SHOP in the menu. It will also be broadcast on Mountain Lake PBS on August 7 at 9 pm.

Photo: Paul Larson interviewing Alex Smith atop Whiteface Mountain.

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