

The Capital

Kent Island

Kent Island man resurrects live radio on Shore

By MICHAEL RHIAN DRISCOLL, For The Capital

Live radio returns to the Eastern Shore at 8 p.m. Jan. 8.

That's when Stevensville resident Van Williamson, the director of National Public Radio's "Morning Edition," resurrects "Radio from Downtown" at the Avalon Theatre in Easton.

Presented in the variety-show style of the 1940s, with music, comedy routines and interviews, the show ran between 1989 and 2001. It went on indefinite hiatus due to general exhaustion and because "no one was feeling especially funny" after the Sept. 11 attacks anyway, said Mr. Williamson's college chum and collaborator, Jack Purdy.

Ellen General, executive director of the Avalon, told them they were always welcome to come back.

"Van just has this creative bug that he's not able to shake, so it's a way for him to do what he does best," she said.

She described the show as an Eastern Shore "Lake Woebegone," with a devoted cult following. The program, which will be taped before a live audience in the historic theater, offers NPR regulars Susan Stamberg and Carl Kasell in a still-unnamed two-act play written by Mr. Williamson and Mr. Purdy.

Mr. Kasell, who has been in radio for almost 50 years, called "Radio from Downtown" "a lot of fun for me. I enjoy getting up onstage and playing off a live audience, and so does Susan. Radio is a very intimate medium, and this is rather like the way things were when I started out."

Other scheduled acts include the Uptown Vocal Jazz Quartet, environmental writer and newspaper columnist Tom Horton, champion duck caller Mitch Hughes, the Bayfield Brass and Phil and Ramone, the "Flamingo Brothers."

The show, depending on how it is received, is expected to run three times a year. And although a serious professional endeavor, Mr. Williamson calls it a labor of love for the cast and crew.

"It's definitely not the thing anybody is doing for the money," Mr. Williamson said.

He began his radio career in 1989, working in public radio for WSCL in Salisbury as a news producer.

"However, I wanted to do something that would allow me to combine my love of music and radio," he said, "and to have a little fun with the radio format. So I got together with

some musician friends of mine."

They offered two live hours of mostly music, combined with introductions and a little talk. Gradually over the years, it grew into something more structured.

"We added some radio theater, some interviews, a few jokes here and there, some sound effects," Mr. Williamson recalled. "We moved the music around, adding different kinds. One thing led to another and now here it is."

Previously, it ran monthly, then every two months, but after about five years, Mr. Williams said he got a "little burnt out."

Over the years, Mr. Williamson and Mr. Purdy developed a whole range of characters that they put through a variety of adventures in genres and topics, ranging from Westerns and science fiction to agriculture and decoys.

The play, for example, tells the story of semi-retired private eye Bif Delmar of Hurlock and his attempt to resolve the slot machine issue in Maryland. Mr. Williamson's inspiration was the golden age of radio in the '40s.

"I always liked to read about the hard-boiled detectives as they were presented on those old shows," he said, "and listen to later recordings on tape or CD."

Another featured actor in it is Greg Smith, a former NPR editor turned independent writer and producer.

"I help edit the scripts, write the music, and also act," he said. "I don't know what parts I'm going to play just yet, because we all play different parts in each story."

Among the characters are Spry Larrmore, past editor of the Hurlock Post Intelligencer Gazette Star Morning Times Advertiser who serves as Bif's sidekick. Another is Big Red, a snake rancher who leads the Snake Boys. They have run-ins with area chicken farmers _ a variation on the conflict of shepherders and cattlemen.

Mr. Purdy, who lives in Baltimore and works in the public relations field as an editorial director, said he looks forward to the performance.

"It's going to be interesting. We will just have to see how it goes. It all depends on the size of the audience we can get into the theater."

WHAT: "Radio from Downtown"

WHERE: Avalon Theatre, 40 E. Dover St., Easton

WHEN: Doors open at 7 p.m Jan. 8, with a musical warm-up to run from 7:30 to 8. The show will be taped until about 10:30 p.m. before a live studio audience for later broadcast on WESM (91.3 FM), WRYP (97.5 FM), and WCEI (96.7 FM) and the Avalon's on the Avalon's public access TV station.

TICKETS: \$25

INFO: avalontheatre.com or 410-822-7299.

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