



# happy days for Cardinal Stage

By Debra Kent • PHOTOGRAPHY BY Steve Raymer

Members of Cardinal Stage Company ham it up. (l-r) Mike Price (*Frog and Toad*), Diane Kondrat (*boom*), Jordan Goodmon (*The Sound of Music*), Lauren Bauman (*The Sound of Music*), Randy White (artistic director), Terrilyn Dennie (*Little Shop of Horrors*), Ken Farrell (*Drawer Boy*).

The fledgling theater company is in the black, drawing thousands to its shows, and on the verge of finding a permanent home. For Artistic Director **Randy White**, this is just Act I.

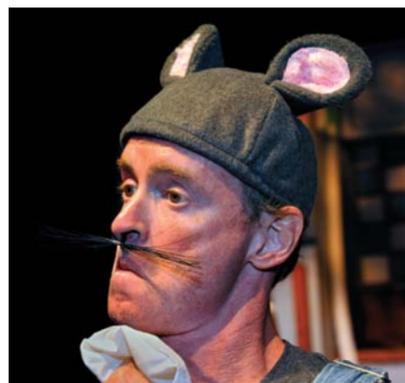




Director Randy White (left) shares a laugh with actors McCary Reynolds (center) and Mike Price during rehearsals for the children's play *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*.

'Randy White is not like anyone I have known or worked with before. He is ambitious, daring, confusing, driven, hilarious, exasperating, professional, challenging, informal, tireless, humane, and very smart.'

—Mike Price, associate artistic director



Surviving four years may be unremarkable for, say, house cats or Honda Civics, but when you're a fledgling theater company in a town that might seem to have enough theater, making it to your fifth year—and in the black, no less—is nothing short of remarkable.

Like some freaky newborn who arrives in the world already dressed and speaking in complete sentences, on January 15th, 2006, Cardinal Stage Company seemed to spring out of nowhere fully formed, with its smart logo, slick posters, smooth productions, and, perhaps strangest of all, none of the public struggles or fundraising appeals that typify nonprofit startups. This perky little bird made its debut at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater with Thornton Wilder's classic *Our Town*, a production so charming and professional that it had Bloomingtonians whispering: "Where on earth did this Cardinal Stage Company come from, and who the heck is behind it?"



### Introducing the maestro

When he wears a baseball cap and flashes his toothy grin, Randy White has that look people like to call "boyish," but this blue-eyed Canadian is no kid. At 44, White already has had a full career as a freelance director, from Santa Cruz to Actors Theatre of Louisville to off-Broadway, and served as resident director at New Dramatists in New York, known as the country's oldest nonprofit center dedicated to new-playwright development.

In 2005 White followed his wife to Bloomington—Ellen MacKay teaches Shakespeare in the IU English department—and like many faculty partners wanted to find a way to work here, too. Doing theater seemed like the logical choice. "I looked around and saw actors with a great deal of talent, the technical skills, and there was a history of doing theater at a certain level that excited me," White recalls. Another plus: Indiana University. Earning his master's in directing at the University of Alberta, White experienced the interplay between the professional and university communities and knew that IU's strong theater program would likely provide a supportive environment for the theater company he had in mind.

White tested the waters with *Our Town* and, buoyed by its success, was emboldened to move forward. He and an intern worked out of his home back then, or, like more than a few local entrepreneurs, he labored at his downtown satellite office (a.k.a. the Bakehouse). "It was thrilling to be working on the edge, guerilla style, but at some point it gets really exhausting. Someone comes for a meeting at the Bakehouse and there are no tables, and the cost of buying coffee really wears you down after a while." Cardinal got its first big break when John Cameron, founder and president of Bloomington-based ProCure Proton Therapy Centers, donated free temporary office space. "John's gifting the office made it possible for us to succeed," says White. "Working out of a coffee shop carries a certain spirit of adventure but, boy, you're so glad when you finally move beyond it."

White, Price, and Reynolds rehearse *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*.



Photo by Lynae Sowinski



'The first Cardinal show I saw was *Unveiling* and I remember just how impressed I was. I left the Waldron thinking, wow, that was great. And not great for Bloomington. Not great for a community theater. Not great for the price. No qualifiers, it was just a great production.'

—Katie Becker, general manager

From tots to grandpops, the audience for *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* awaits the beginning of the show. One 4-year-old described it as "the best movie EVER."



pieces starting with a scene from *Titus Andronicus* and ending with the bloody *A Crime in a Madhouse*. "It was entirely unsuccessful in conception and execution. It wasn't hardcore enough for the audience who wanted something really gory, and it was too out there for the mainstream audience. I didn't do a good job of thinking it through."

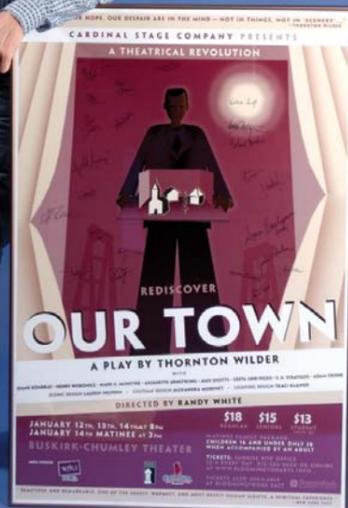
The following year, the whimsical *O Lovely Glowworm*, an exploration of the daydreams of a dead, stuffed goat, turned out to be another mistake. "I loved the script, but it wasn't entirely successful in the production." The experience taught White an important lesson about Bloomington audiences and just how much risk some are willing to accept. He explains that audiences usually don't mind some risks with content or language, but "where you end up in trouble in a smaller community like Bloomington is when you start playing with structure, when you tell the story in an experimental way instead of going from point A to B to C. If you tell a story from three different points of view, it's the audience's job to put it all together, and they don't

at the time, he says that after the meeting he knew White "was the real deal." Price has since discovered that "Randy White is not like anyone I have known or worked with before. Randy is ambitious, daring, confusing, driven, hilarious, exasperating, professional, challenging, informal, tireless, humane, and very smart. He's a great asset to the arts community and to Bloomington in general."

"The first Cardinal show I saw was *Unveiling* [in 2006] and I remember just how impressed I was," says Katie Becker, general manager. "I left the Waldron thinking, wow, that was great. And not great for Bloomington. Not great for a community theater. Not great for the price. No qualifiers, it was just a great production. And I guess I was hooked." What started as a six-week marketing practicum for class credit turned into a job offer 18 months later. "I jumped at the opportunity. I feel really fortunate to be a part of this company and to be able to stay in Bloomington, which is such a fun town."

Though White can be a stern taskmaster, Becker can't imagine working anywhere else. The stress of mounting a new production is tempered by moments of sheer pleasure, which are plentiful, she says. "The other week, I was working the box office for *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. One day during intermission this little boy looks up at me and just exclaims, 'This is the best movie EVER!' I said, 'Yeah, this is a fun play, isn't it?' Then we talked a little about the difference between a movie and a play. And it was just so heartwarming to know that we were able to bring such joy to this little four-year-old and introduce him to theater."

From Cardinal's inception, in fact, introducing young people to theater has been a primary goal of White's. Several of the productions, including *The Diary of Anne Frank*, have had strong educational components, while Cardinal's "community access ticket initiative" gives away 1,000 tickets to underserved children and their families. The company is also reaching out to kids through more family-oriented shows and special matinees for



A younger Randy White posed with a poster for *Our Town*, Cardinal Stage's first production in January 2006. The photo, by Tom Stio, was taken for *Bloom* and appeared in the magazine's third edition.

### A star is born

White registered his company as a 501c3 nonprofit, established a board of directors, and gradually added employees—not part-time student interns but actual full-time salaried staff. The season grew, too, from one show to three to five as Cardinal rocked audiences with successes like *Amadeus*, *Oliver!*, *Doubt*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Sound of Music*, and, especially, *A Year with Frog and Toad*, a production that was so well received that White describes it as having carried a "rosy glow."

While gleaning the best local talent, White uses his national connections to attract theater pros from beyond Bloomington's borders, including Chicago actor Danny Goldring (Henry Drummond, *Inherit the Wind*) who has appeared in such films as *Natural Born Killers* and *The Fugitive* and TV shows like *Six Feet Under* and *Star Trek*, and Melissa Bohon (Maria, *The Sound of Music*), who understudied and performed the role of Glinda in the first national tour of *Wicked*. Today Cardinal employs five full-time people, including marketing and development directors, and has eight shows slated for the 2010-2011 season.

Like any theater company, Cardinal has had its share of missteps on stage. "*Shocktoberfest* was the low point," White admits, referring to a 2007 production of five short

have a lot of experience with that type of storytelling. So unless you get it exactly right, there's a lot of room for failure. It was a huge show and the narrative payoff wasn't immediately apparent. People were confused by it. They didn't feel rewarded for staying with it."

Even so, White is convinced that the Glowworms of the theater world have as much right to the stage as the Von Trapps. "There's got to be a place for experimental theater in Bloomington, even if audiences are small," he says. "There are enough people who enjoy watching experimentation and even get something out of failure because they realize there's a larger theatrical purpose in the greater community, in how we tell stories in new and exciting ways."

White is passionate but also smart and strategic about theater, and as he talks it becomes clear why he has managed to attract serious talent to his fold—local theater veterans like Diane Kondrat, and Mike Price who moved back to Bloomington from Atlanta to join Cardinal as associate artistic director. "I first met Randy at the Uptown [café] when he was planning *Our Town*," Price recalls. Although he was already committed to another production

Actors Mike Price (left) and Ken Farrell read for parts in Cardinal Stage's upcoming season opener *The Grapes of Wrath*. Artistic director Randy White observes.



high schoolers. As for college students, Cardinal provides the theatrical component in IU's Themester, a semester-long learning experience.

## How much theater?

Despite Cardinal's quick success, there are still people who ask the question: Does it really make sense to have another theater company in a town of only 70,000 souls? Detour Theater Company in the 1990s didn't make it, and the Bloomington Playwrights Project scrapes for every penny in spite of a loyal following and track record of innovative productions. White steadies his gaze as he leans in to provide the well-honed answer. "I negate the question. I refute the basic idea behind the question. The more theater there is, the more people will go to theater and the more people will give to theater. Our challenge as theater administrators and artists is not to squabble over the pie that exists but to bake bigger pies."

You can see White considering his words carefully before crafting them for publication, as well he should in a town where the arts—supporting them, administrating them, housing them—is an emotionally and politically loaded subject. The struggling Bloomington Area Arts Council all but collapsed amid concerns over mismanagement while its headquarters and a key performance space, The John Waldron Arts

Center, was sold by the city to Ivy Tech Community College last spring with the agreement that it would remain a community arts center and retain its performance spaces.

"The arts community in Bloomington is obviously going through a great deal of turmoil, and it's been really difficult for Cardinal and the other arts organizations," White begins, gingerly. "The Arts Council was in bad shape financially and their response was to raise rates, literally tripling Waldron's rental rates. And while we were fighting it, the Council gave the building back to the city."

Yet despite this mess and a recession, Cardinal soldiered on and is now ready for its own building (and in case you're wondering, the Buskirk-Chumley is too big and too pricey for most of their shows). White envisions a 15,000- to 25,000-square-foot structure with room for two stages and spaces for an office, set construction, and storage. A 250-seat theater would cover the classic crowd-pleasers while a 100-seat space would be just the right size for more experimental productions. (At this writing, in fact, the company appears close to buying a vacant downtown building.)

## The future looks bright

With five paid employees, balanced books, and the real possibility of a permanent home,

Cardinal Stage is on a roll. As White and Mike Price perfect their process of selecting shows—the upcoming season includes *The Grapes of Wrath*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Lonesome West*—they're also bringing in more Equity actors to strengthen the talent pool while the expanded staff focuses on marketing and fundraising. Cardinal will also be venturing beyond Bloomington's borders this season: In March, its production of *Souvenir* will travel to Sanibel Island's Big Arts complex in Florida, and at Christmastime, *The Santaland Diaries* will head to Indianapolis for a two-week stint after a special limited run in Bloomington.

White has even bigger ambitions. "In ten years, it's my hope that Cardinal will have a strong regional presence and the real stirrings of a national profile," he says. Until then, he is happy to be making serious headway. "People now believe that Cardinal is part of the mix, part of what makes Bloomington special. I can feel it." He can also see it in the hard numbers. Five thousand people saw Cardinal's recent production of *The Sound of Music*. "So we're getting there. We're not an institution like Lotus, so maybe we haven't quite arrived yet. But at least I can see over the horizon where we're landing." \*



## Mainstage Season 2010-2011

John Steinbeck's  
**THE GRAPES OF WRATH**  
SEPTEMBER 2 - 12

**SOUVENIR**

*A Fantasia on the Life of Florence Foster Jenkins*  
OCTOBER 29-NOVEMBER 14

A Music-Infused Family Holiday Special  
**A CHRISTMAS CAROL**  
Adapted by Karen Louise Hebden  
DECEMBER 17-26

IF YOU GIVE  
A MOUSE A COOKIE  
OCTOBER 1-10

Shakespeare's  
**ROMEO & JULIET**  
FEBRUARY 18-MARCH 6

A Feckin' Irish Comedy  
**THE LONESOME WEST**  
(For Mature Audiences)  
MARCH 25-APRIL 10

Lerner & Lowe's  
**MY FAIR LADY**  
JUNE 17-26

A YEAR WITH  
FROG AND TOAD  
MAY 13-29

## Cardinal for Kids