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## Curtain Rising

Bas Bleu prepares to open 1940s Radio Christmas Carol while its writer-director recovers from a heart attack

By Andra Coberly,  
November 14, 2007

Theater types are known for their resiliency, for their ability to pick themselves up by their period costumery, swipe their cheeks with rosy blush, walk on stage and give it their all.

So it's no surprise that just a month after writer-director Walton Jones' body was weakened by various maladies and struck by a heart attack, Bas Bleu Theatre Company will open the world premiere of his long-anticipated follow-up to 1940s Radio Hour, which was first performed in 1974 by a troupe of Yale drama students, including a young Meryl Streep. The show was then on Broadway for a handful of years, and later performed by thousands of theater companies across the country.

To Go:

1940s Radio Christmas Carol

Opening Date: Saturday, Nov. 17 at 7:30 p.m.

Runs through Dec. 30 on various nights.

Bas Bleu Theatre Company  
401 Pine St.

Call 498-8949 or visit  
[www.basbleu.org](http://www.basbleu.org).



### The Cast

The show must go on for the cast of 1940s Radio Christmas Carol, which will make its world premiere on Nov. 17 at Bas Bleu Theatre.

By Todd Stoffer

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Indeed, Jones says 1940s Radio Christmas Carol must go on.

The mid-October rehearsals of Jones' sequel were supposed to help him to “workshop” the piece, massage out the kinks and continue to develop the jokes, the music and the characters. No play comes out of its theatrical womb perfect, and Jones and the cast were ready to dive in, rewriting and reworking through rehearsal.

“Of course, the idea was we would be working it on its feet,” said Bas Bleu artistic director and 1940s Radio Christmas Carol actress Wendy Ishii. “A majority of plays have been tried and tested over time in many theaters. You know what you are getting when you go into it. But with a new work, it's risky and creative and scary and explorative and exciting.”

The show is being called the “crown jewel” of Bas Bleu's 2007-2008 season. And the emotion and passion that swirled about the production were electric as the cast and crew prepared to begin rehearsals with Jones at the helm.

But those emotions soon shifted to worry and dread. Jones was in the emergency room. A kidney infection caused him to develop sepsis. His temperature soared to more than 106 degrees. And then

he had a heart attack.

His wife, holding their baby daughter, clutched the doctor's arm as he pushed her husband into surgery.

“He is your first priority right now. We have a 10-month-old. I need him,” she told the doctor.

Jones later woke up, unaware of what he had been through, with his older daughters at his side.

“When I asked the doctor if I could go back to rehearsals, he said 'You've just survived two things that could have killed you. Respect that.’”

Jones now sits at home in recovery, taking the occasional walk, and attending cardiac therapy—while a cast and crew hope to do his work justice.

It was 1970, at a Florida dinner theater. The production of *The Star Spangled Girl* had become a “technical nightmare.”

“They wanted to go dark instead of doing the show, but I lied and told them that I had done a one-man show about a sound effects guy at a radio station in the '30s whose cast never showed up, and he did all the different voices and sound effects for the cast,” Jones said. “They let me go on. The fact that I was running around like a chicken with my head cut off was funny to the audience.”

Four years after his one-man performance, that idea transformed into something new. Jones was studying acting and later directing at Yale just years after the school had developed a repertory—which had become a mecca for those who would later see great success in theater and film.

After a play had to drop from the summer Yale Cabaret season, Jones and a troupe of theater students pulled together 1940s *Radio Hour* to fill the spot last minute. They had just days. Jones took a train to New York to dig through archives at CBS and NBC looking for old radio shows and commercials. He developed a nice little scene of characters putting on a radio variety show.

“Luckily, it was funny and word of mouth was that it was funny, and there were lines around the block,” he said. “We would come in from the sweltering heat of New Haven wearing wool pants and coats and shaking snow off our shoulders. They thought it was just hilarious. So, it was really a big joke. They had seen us doing classics and new stuff but they had never seen us being silly.”

The production soon became a summer regular at the Cabaret—and then a holiday favorite and then a touring show and then on to Broadway and even to the White House.

“It was a whirlwind. It never sunk in until we were rehearsing on the stage,” he said of directing on Broadway. “It's something you dream of but you never dream it right because you don't know what it's like.”

The “band” went from a single piano to a 20-something piece orchestra and the theater went from seating less than 100 in a basement to the massive crowds of theater's *Big Show*.

“We had a cast of seven in a 90-seat theater and no one in the company was a good singer except for Meryl Streep. We were decidedly second rate. That production brought charm to the piece that was

lost on Broadway,” Jones said. “It looked really polished and spiffy. It wasn't bad but it was different.”

From there, they began licensing the subsidiary rights to the script. Within two years, Jones said, 200 to 300 theaters were doing the play.

Since then, Jones has used those funds to do more fulfilling work.

“I feel like Radio Hour's success allowed me to experiment and do what I wanted to do,” he said. “Instead, I'd probably be doing Pygmalion in Cleveland in February.”

That's what brought Jones to Fort Collins, where he serves as the theater division department head at Colorado State University.

And all along he has tried to create a prequel or sequel to 1940s Radio Hour. And very recently, it came to him. 1940s Radio Christmas Carol is a bit different than the original—most of the old characters have moved on, there is less music and no comedic acts (though there is comedy). It takes place in a new era in radio, one that will soon be taken over by TV.

“I hope people like it,” he said. “I feel like it is an honest sequel that is not trying to be the other show.”

The night before 1940s Radio Christmas Carol was supposed to open for the first time ever, the cast smiles big for the practice audience, a friendly community group that seems eager to preview to show.

Before the actors take the stage—a cozy-looking radio station around Christmas time—Bas Bleu General Manager Matt Strauch makes a quick announcement, explaining the situation, making sure they understand that “this is just a rehearsal.”

The show goes fairly smoothly and the crowd laughs when they are supposed to laugh and the cast finally hears reaction from what has long been an empty theater.

Just one more week to make it all a bit cleaner, to get accents and jokes down, to get sound effects right.

It hasn't been easy getting to this point without the writer and director at their side.

Jones' doctor advised a slow recovery, and partaking in the antics of dress and technical rehearsals were not a part of his prescription. The cast had been videotaping the run-throughs and putting the recordings on Jones' porch at night, “under his pumpkin.” When he was strong enough, Jones would watch them and take notes for the cast.

Which is certainly no way to do a world premiere.

“Certainly, not having him physically at the rehearsals to give us feedback and to get ideas was difficult, because Walt is such a funny and creative and dynamic artist,” Ishii said. “He'll see something and it will trigger an idea, and he'll say, 'OK, let's do this or that.' We lost that immediacy of being able to creatively work together. ... And I am so proud and thankful to our cast and crew

that together we decided to forge ahead rather than cancel or postpone.”

It became almost unrealistic at that point to get 1940s Radio Christmas Carol perfected on time without Jones on hand, and opening night was postponed a week—to Nov. 17.

Bas Bleu also hired well-respected Denver director Terry Dodd, who worked with the Fort Collins theater on *Angels in America: Perestroika*, to come work with the cast. Locals Laura Jones and Michael Gorgan have also stepped into help.

In a picture perfect world, it may not be the ideal scenario to debut 1940s Radio Christmas Carol. But, to the cast and Jones' family and friends, the show has been blessed: He is alive and recovering.

“All he needed to really do is look at his wife and daughter and see that this is an adjustment worth taking,” Ishii said. “This is not an experience that anyone was anticipating, but it's sure better than the alternative.”

While Jones does not know if he will be able to attend opening night of the show, he knows the play is in good hands. To the actors and crew, his pre-show advice is simple.

“Have fun,” he said.