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By: Laura Deni**

LEAP OF FAITH HEIRESS PRODUCTIONS STAGE PROJECTS: CANCER ORGANIZATIONS PROFIT

It's amazing what you can do if you don't realize you can't do it.

Enter Heiress Productions - the only theatrical company in the US whose purpose is to help cancer survivors, patients and their families.

These are *not* productions which tell the stories of patients or their families or address social ills. Rather, the productions are mainstream and patrons may not even realize how the profits are being spent.

Laura Faith and Mary Willis White are two young, bright New Yorkers who are in the entertainment community. Mary has spent years teaching tap dancing. Laura is an actress. They spoke with Broadway To Vegas about their leap of faith.



Laura Faith and Mary Willis White

"As far as we know, we are the only organization whose mission to reach out to cancer patients and their families," said Mary. "Initially when Laura and I sat down and decided that we wanted to do some good work with our passions and our skills for acting and theater, we thought about doing one show - a benefit night. The more we began to look at our business plan and figure out what it was going to take to put on that benefit and decide what organization we would want to benefit, we decided why not dream big. Go ahead and file for articles of incorporation and become a non profit, so that we could serve a whole host of different cancer non-profit organizations."

"I think we would both like to say that if we had known what it was going to take to make it happen, we may not have," she laughed.

"If we had known how difficult it would be, we never would have tried to attempt it. Fortunately, we had no idea so we just went for it," confessed Mary.

The partnership of Laura and Mary was serendipity.

"We met in an acting for film class," recalled Mary. "We got partnered up randomly by the instructor for a theme that we were working on. Then I was an audition that required team work. I asked Laura to come in and audition with me. So, we got to spend some more time working together. And, we found that our lives had very much been changed by our family's battles with cancer. We truly bonded over that. "

In January of 2002 Laura's mother died after a nine month battle with stage IV melanoma. Almost four years to the day, her younger sister was diagnosed with stage III melanoma. After undergoing complicated surgeries, she is, astonishingly, now cancer free.

Both of Mary's parents are cancer survivors.



Starting Heiress Productions has been their coping mechanism.

"It's be a huge way to use my hurt and grief from the past and propel something hopeful in helping other people while doing something that I love," explained Laura. "To put something like cancer and theater together - two things that you usually don't have pared up - to put my passion towards something that has been a big heartache for me has been incredibly healing. There isn't a night that I don't step on stage, or go to one of our shows, that I don't think - Oh, Mom I wish you were here to see this - but you're not here, so that is why I am doing this."

"My sister who is survivor is the reason why I keep on, as well," she added. "They both had

melanoma. My mom wasn't discovered until it was Stage 4, so there were no treatment options left. My sister was in Stage 3 and it is a miracle that she has been several years cancer free."

"Both of my parents are cancer survivors," related Mary. "My dad from prostate and my mother from breast. They attend the shows and are major supporters. I can't imagine going through this without them. They provide emotional and some financial support. They have really gotten to know a lot of the people who work with us and just think it is fantastic."

Their supporters agree.

Each season productions are mounted at the 88-seat Lion Theatre on New York's Theatre Row, which is a collection of newly renovated historic theaters in Times Square. Those include; The Acorn Theatre, The Beckett Theatre, The Clurman Theatre, The Kirk Theatre, The Lion Theatre, and The Studio Theatre. Theatre Row is owned and operated by the 32nd Street Development Corporation.



"We have a Board of Directors who are not paid," Mary said referring to Amanda Axelrod, Christina Lenord, and Barbara Paxton.

"We have no paid staff. The actors and our production staff are always paid. It's all non-Equity," she explained. "We rent the theater and that is quite expensive. We have a very loyal donor base and we are in the process of really ramping up our grant writing efforts and utilizing some of those matching donations, which are still out there. from companies where our constituents work."

"Our clientele is really a cross section of people in the New York area," she continued. "We have a lot of supporters who are from the tri-state area."

Patrons also include cancer partner organizations and their clients.

"Because Theater Row is such a great avenue and there are six theaters in the complex, we also get built in marketing of people who come to Theatre Row and see our signs."



Heiress Productions has partnered with; Us TOO International Prostate Cancer Network; Gilda's Club, Miracle House, Esophageal Cancer Awareness Association, Kids Konnected, Leukemia Research Foundation, Fertile Hope, Hope & Heroes Children's Cancer Fund, Cure Search

National Childhood Cancer Foundation, Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults, SHARE and I [2]y (I'm Too Young For This!).



Which organizations are invited to partner and which group receives the profits of a particular show become a judgment call.



"They don't apply. We approach them. We approach the organization. "We *don't* get the organizations together and battle out who gets a show," she stressed. "We have selected every organization."

"It is a relationship built with each of them. That has been very important to us," she emphasized. "In being small and wanting to grow ourselves, we wanted to find organizations that - whatever we could give them and the publicity we could provide - would make a big impact for them. We wanted to go with organizations where we could *really* help."

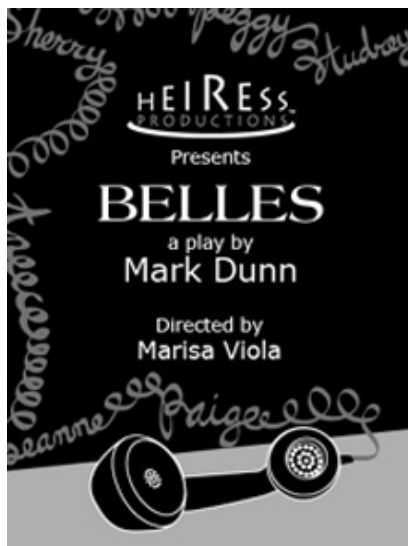
The current production *Belles* benefits Joe's House, a non-profit organization, which serves cancer patients, their advocates, and social workers by providing hundreds of different types of lodging facilities near hospitals and cancer treatment centers. Profits from *Three Movements* by Martin Zimmerman, which is a play based on the life of the famed ballet choreographer George Balanchine, went to Us TOO, which provides educational materials and peer-to-peer support for prostate cancer patients and their loved ones through 325 support group chapters in the U.S. and abroad.



Morgan Baker and Laura Faith in *Lunch Hour*

As with any other theatrical company, deciding what to produce is on top of the to-do list.

"We do a *lot* of reading," laughed Laura. "We get recommendations from a lot of people. We read and *read* and hope that something hits us that we can do. We are not competing with a past production that has been big - or something that has been done a lot. We look for something that has a general appeal, not only to our theater goers but to people who are charity supporters and might not be as *into* theater. So we try to find a balance."



Productions have included *Lunch Hour* by Jean Kerr and the farce *Affluenza!* by James Sherman, which was seen in regional theatres around the nation following its debut in Chicago. *Affluenza!* made its New York City premiere in the Heiress Productions mounting at the Lion Theatre. Maura Farver directed a cast which included Nancy Evans, Paul Herbig, Philippe D. Preston, Michael Saenz, Stephen Squibb and Mary Willis White.

"*Three Movements* was the first time we had done an Equity Showcase and that was a brand new script, so we were really excited to present that", Mary related. "*Belles* is dynamite," she said of the current offering, penned by Mark Dunn, who is currently playwright-in-residence with the New Jersey Repertory Company and the Community Theatre League in

Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

"A wonderful script," declared Mary. "We had the amazing fortune to be able to talk to the playwright. He allowed us to update the script and take it from the 1980's piece that it was - take the 45 phone calls that are in this show and make it a little more up to date with the use of cell phones."

"We are in the process of figuring out what is going up next fall."

Both Mary and Laura hold down day jobs while running Heiress Productions. They've turned their personal juggling acts into audience recruitment.

"I do several things," added Laura. "Right now I work for a financial trading company, which is not really how my brain works, but I fell into that as a really flexible position. And, I do some acting which throws some money my way."

Financial trading company? Do you stand on a corner wearing a *Will Trade Stocks For Food* sign?

"The financial community finds it really fascinating that I do this other thing," she answered. "They don't know how to understand the arts. A lot of people that I work with come to the shows, because they are just *fascinated* to see this other thing that I do."

As with all theatrical companies the money situation is an ugly headed beast.

"Like any non-profit our biggest problem is financial," admitted Laura. "In New York there are always fantastic people to hire and work with, and great theatrical opportunities. The problems are financial. Part of healing for me is to use my personal skills and passions to make a difference for cancer awareness and research through Heiress Productions"

As for what is important to Mary, she responded: "I hope this doesn't sound trite, but it's the journey. Finding a script that we love. Then taking it from let's do a first reading and casting, getting a production team together and seeing it in an amazing space on 42nd Street in New York City. And, knowing it *isn't just* about the production - but there are any number of people who are being helped by this one little show and what we can do."

Belles runs through April 12 at the Lion Theatre on Theatre Row, NYC.



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