

The Colorado Springs Business Journal

OCTOBER 25, 2002

Move over Sherlock: this company knows who “dunnit”

By **Becky Hurley**
Contributing Writer

The game of Clue has inspired a number of spin-offs – but none more entertaining than the murder-mystery thrillers created by a Colorado Springs-based theater production company, now in its seventeenth year.

Red Herring Productions, specialists in corporate and private murder-mystery entertainment, goes far beyond tracking down Professor Plum in the conservatory with a lead pipe. The company's five partners, Don Moon, Mike Stevens, Chris Daly, Charlie Ammen and Donna Vessey, have written original scripts and have produced shows that cover twenty-five different homicidal scenarios. All the partners hold day jobs, but the talented quintet thrives on their after-hours escapades as the originators and stars of mysteries-for-hire.

The troupe's playbill may include such thrillers as: *Murder at Buffalo Chip*; *Murder at the Big Top*; *Murder Al Dente*; *Murder at the Mall*; and *Murder at Colorado General* – and that's just the short list. The other twenty offerings range from a CEO murder (which sounds a little risky but Vessey says it's “an excellent ice-breaker for diverse audiences”) to murder on a cruise ship or on the political campaign trail. No villain escapes undetected – but cast innuendos and improvisation, combined with the audience's nightly reaction, keep each performance fresh. “As actors, we love it when the audience surprises us,” she adds, noting that even hecklers have a place in the Red Herring scheme of things.

Highly-structured and executed by an experienced cast, each Red Herring production consists of four parts: the schmooze, the scenes, the questioning and the wrap-up. During the “schmooze,” members of the cast circulate (in costume) among attendees during a pre-dinner reception or cocktail hour – dropping clues and introducing themselves to the attendees. (Most shows involve anywhere from four or five actors to as many as 13 or 14.) Next, the “scenes” begin during dessert. Each “suspect” will have a scene with the story's victim (who dies and is removed from the stage). This is followed by “questioning,” an interactive segment hosted by a “game master,” during which the audience questions the suspects about their whereabouts and motives. Finally, all is revealed, the murder is solved, and the three-to-four-hour presentation is complete.

Donna Vessey, vice president of casting and directing, helps market Red Herring entertainment to the corporate world through website

promotions and links, community involvement, and regular attendance at meetings of leads groups, the Southern Colorado Women's Chamber, the Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce, and the city's film commission and more.



The Red Herring Productions' partners estimate that they've performed for 800+ audiences in the past 17 years. Pictured here from left to right: Charlie Ammen, Chris Daly, Donna Vessey, Mike Stevens and Don Moon.

“We all market our product,” she says, adding that each of her partners plays an important role in maintaining the company's visibility. The corporate marketing strategy includes contacting human resource departments, holiday party-planners and company owners or managers. Red Herring Productions often mans a booth at the Chamber's Business Expo or at a Convention and Visitors Bureau member function – and all five partners work with their own meeting and convention planners as well. The biggest chunk of business comes, however, from the group's website and word-of-mouth referrals.

Audiences range from corporate holiday parties and employee events to training sessions and bed and breakfast getaway weekends. “Our typical corporate group runs 100-150 people or more,” Vessey says. “The bed and breakfast weekends are for smaller groups and are often held on Friday and Saturday nights.”

Though September 11 has affected the entire economy, Vessey is optimistic that Red Herring will finish 2002 on a high note. “We expect to do close to 100 shows this year which isn't bad,” she says. In 2000, for example, the company had its best year ever, presenting 103 different shows in a single year – with the majority booked for pre-holiday weeks. Typically, 40 to 50 percent of the group's bookings come from repeat customers; most reservations

still come from new business contacts.

Red Herring has also racked up a reputation for sharing the stage with other entertainers. “After seventeen years, we've gotten used to working with local bands, DJs and the hotel or restaurant serving staff,” Vessey says. “In addition, over time our scripts and our ease with varied audiences continues to improve. We like working with any type of audience and are popular with meeting planners because we are so flexible.”

In addition to Pikes Peak region appearances, the company's two troupes have performed (often in separate venues on the same night) in Vail, Breckenridge, Aspen, Angel Fire, New Mexico, Cheyenne, Wyoming and at locations as far away as Richmond, Virginia. That performance was especially memorable, Vessey says, because the corporation that hired them flew out all ten cast members, paid all hotel and food expenses as well as a fee for the performance itself. “We stayed in the absolute lap of luxury in Richmond – but then we've done shows in the mountains in rustic settings with just a tent to use for costume changes,” she adds.

Another special request came from the Pikes Peak Center on Deafness' (PPCD) executive director, Laura Williams, for a September 2002 fundraiser held at the Cheyenne Mountain Conference Resort. The Red Herring cast entertained the PPCD audience by utilizing a sign language interpreter and “shadowing” techniques to involve the audience. “It was one of the most innovative and exciting projects we've ever done,” said Vessey. According to Williams, the evening was a tremendous success for her participants as well. “Not only did the performers succeed in communicating their story, but members of our audience were able to ask questions and respond to the cast,” she said. “It was a great interactive evening.” Red Herring Productions also recently adapted its *Murder at Buffalo Chip* mystery for an event sponsored by the Council on the Blind.

Though Red Herring president, Don Moon, fills his days in the lighting business; Treasurer Mike Stevens works in computer systems; Secretary Chris Daly (past Mayor of Manitou Springs) works at Veritas Computers; vice president of operations, Charlie Ammen, fills his days at Premiere Teleconferencing and Donna Vessey is a full-time actress and talent for commercials and film, they all share a common love of theater and performing. “This is the best gig in town,” Vessey affirms. “I can't imagine that any of us will ever give it up.”