

## ROCKY MOUNTAIN COLLEGE TO OPERATE HISTORIC VIRGINIA CITY OPERA HOUSE

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BILLINGS – The home of Montana’s oldest professional acting company will be operated by the state’s oldest institution of higher education when the curtain goes up in Virginia City’s Opera House this Memorial Day.

The opera house will be celebrating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the repertory theatre performed by the Illustrious Virginia City Players company.

The Montana Heritage Commission has selected Rocky Mountain College as the official managing operator of the historic Virginia City Opera House, announced Tenlee Atchinson, commission program director.

“History lives in Virginia City. Sharing Montana history and offering diverse educational experiences for visitors is important. Partnering with Rocky Mountain College is a great opportunity for us to grow our educational programs,” she said.

For Rocky, the opportunity to have a high profile at a major tourist location, coupled with the opportunities for Rocky students to serve as the historic Virginia City Players, “is a wonderful challenge and a wonderful opportunity,” said RMC President Michael Mace.

Overseeing the project will be Gearld Roe, RMC professor of theatre arts.

RMC will offer a number of paid internships for students. These will include positions for actors, a stage manager, a technical director, a business manager and an education program director.

“This is especially exciting for us because we want to create a strong educational component with what we’re doing,” Roe said. “Educating people about the history of the opera house and the history of Virginia City is as important as the entertainment we’ll provide.”

RMC will provide a curriculum for area school teachers who can arrange student field trips. Students will have a guide book that mirrors the lesson plans. When they complete the curriculum they will receive a sheriff’s badge entitling them to a free show with their parents.

Roe is also enthusiastic about Rocky’s involvement because of the connections to other RMC alumni already involved in Virginia City projects. Adjacent to the historic opera house is the Bale of Hay Saloon, operated by Gaye Rossow, RMC ‘91; and the educational component was crafted by Lynn (DeBree) Al, RMC ’91.

Roe’s link to the opera house dates back to 1978 when he first came to Montana to

teach at Montana State University.

“I was told about it, went to see it, and the next thing you know, I was in it,” he remembered.

Under RMC’s management, three shows will be performed by the entire cast: “Rustle Your Bustle” (a musical melodrama written by company member, Jimmy Moore); “Sweeney Todd” (the original nonmusical melodrama by George Dibdin Pitt); and “Aggie, the Mail-Order Bride” (which Roe will adapt from Moliere's “School for Wives,” setting it in the West.) There will be a fourth show that only a few players will perform, “The Marriage Proposal,” a short farce about the pitfalls of proposing.

Performances are presented from Memorial Day to Labor Day, Tuesday through Sunday.

President Mace is also looking forward to a special alumni event with a day touring Virginia City and Nevada City, followed by a pitchfork BBQ and an evening show.

Virginia City sits high in the Rocky Mountains along Alder Gulch. Gold was first discovered here in 1863, during the Civil War. Within a year the town grew to over 10,000 in population and served as the Territorial Capital from 1865 to 1875. Virginia City is the largest intact gold rush town in the nation, and is founding site of much of Montana culture and society. The opera house was converted from the livery stable. The Virginia City Players' variety productions, in the style of 19th-century entertainment, are the oldest continuously operating summer stock theater west of the Mississippi.

Just a mile away sits Nevada City, a western town created from a collection of buildings from other Montana towns and Yellowstone National Park. Active historic preservation of the sites is on-going and Nevada City hosts the largest living history program in Montana each summer.

The opera house boasts the one of only a handful of Cremona photoplayers that exist in the world, circa early 1900s, which was used to accompany silent motion pictures. Most connoisseurs of the mechanical piano consider the Cremona, manufactured by Chicago's Marquette piano Company, as the Rolls Royce of photoplayers.

There are also few Cremona players. RMC will benefit from having one, Dave Calendine, operate the Cremona at the opera house. Calendine plays the organ at Radio City Music Hall at Christmas time, but works out of Detroit where he plays for the Fisher Theater. Calendine also presents Buster Keaton and Laurel & Hardy silent movies at the opera house, which were the kinds of movies the Cremona was designed to accompany.

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