

Theatre Keeper

by Margaret Clevenger

The stars twinkle overhead in the ceiling at the Bama Theatre thanks in large part to David H. Jones. And when the curtain opens and the actor crosses the stage, it is the cue from Jones that fires up the background music and shines the spotlight on the performing thespian.

Jones has been running the sound and lighting at the theatre for the last twenty years. He is not officially on staff, but his equipment is housed there, and he is hired to do almost all the shows that come through the stage door.

“Most people give me a call and we work something out,” Jones said. “My unofficial title is technical director.”

When he was sixteen, Jones



The familiar, inviting facade of Tuscaloosa's treasured Bama Theatre

started working for the Tuscaloosa Children's Theatre. The company performs at the Bama Theatre, and Jones continues to handle the technical duties for all their shows.

Except for a two year break from 2001- 2002, when he toured with the Christian rock band, Brother's Keeper, Jones has been a steady presence at the Bama.

The Dinah Washington Cultural Arts Center and the Bama Theatre bookend a block of Greensboro Avenue in downtown Tuscaloosa, and Jones stays busy at both. When the stage for the Cultural Arts Center was being planned, he was right there in the thick of things.

"We had to figure out what

soft goods (curtains) we would need, and we had to measure and hang all of those," he said. "We pretty much made it match the theatre (Bama), so it wasn't a real tough job." By design, the practice space at the CAC is the same size as the stage at the Bama, enabling groups to move from rehearsal to performance with little disruption.

For the last two years, Jones has been in charge of lighting the ice skating rink that is set up at the old Queen City Pool site every winter. "I enjoy doing the ice skating rink," he said. "But it's a lot of work to keep it going outdoors."

The cold, wet weather plays a prominent role when choosing and setting up equipment for the

rink. "Most everything that I've purchased for the rink is for outdoors except for the snowflakes that are on the ice, so I was constantly fighting the battle of keeping those things lit. When I did it last year, I specifically bought things for the outdoors, so they are impervious to water. But the dimmers for the snowflakes are not. The city bought the power distribution boxes for last year and they are very sensitive to moisture, and they were constantly tripping the snowflakes and causing a problem. So we'll have to work on that next year. But we got through it."

While Jones spends hours every week at the Bama Theatre or the CAC, his full-time job is

David H. Jones pictured with daughter Isabella, sons Brewer (back center) and Henderson (front) and wife Katie Brewer Jones.

helping at the family business, BAMASTUFF.

Jones designs and maintains the website for the business, buys the merchandise, and creates many of the graphics for the T-shirts.

His sister, Tracey Snider, also helps with the graphics. “She runs Alabama Express, which is our sister store, and she has a great eye for design. She is very fashion aware so she has in mind what people want to buy and she usually nails it. More than half our merchandise is what we design. You can only get it from us.”

B A M A S T U F F w a s originally called the Alabama Book Store which was founded by Jones’ grandfather, William Henderson Jones, in 1939. “We just changed the name last year because we stopped selling textbooks,” Jones said. The business will celebrate its 75th anniversary this year in the same building, a building that was designed by David O. Whilldin, the architect who also designed the Bama theatre.

“I try to be at BAMASTUFF as much as I can,” Jones said. “Fortunately, my father is very forgiving with the amount of time that I spend away from here. I try to make up for it at home because I can work at home as the graphic designer. Dad has been very supportive which is great, because I would not be able to do what I do without it.”

In 2013, David Jones received a Druid Arts Award for his extensive support of the arts and his role in contributing to Tuscaloosa County’s quality of life. It is the



second time he has been given the award.

This year Jones was one of two community members who received the Steven L. Mann Award which is presented by the Mystic Krewe of the Druids. The other recipient was Wayne Adams. The award is in recognition of outstanding contributions in AIDS prevention through education and service.

The Mystic Krewe has held their funding raising events at the Bama for twenty years. Jones has worked at nineteen of those events. "It's a huge honor for me to do their shows. I do their Mardi Gras ball every year and they just say, 'Here's our theme, go crazy.' They raised about \$40,000 one night for West Alabama AIDS Outreach."

The theatre has long been an important part of Jones' life and not just with his duties as a technical director. He met his wife, Katie Brewer Jones, there.

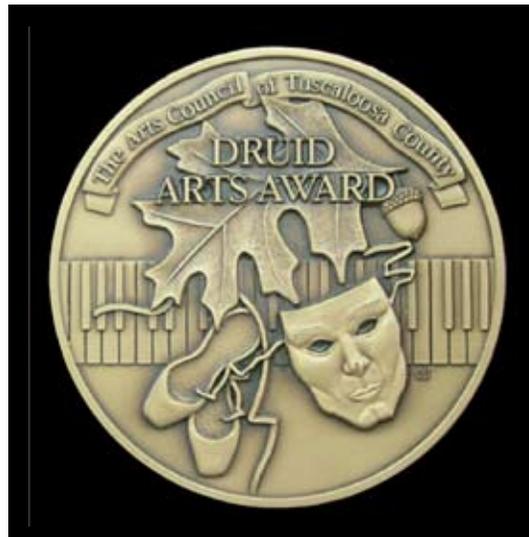
"She was the stage manager for shows for the Children's Theatre. I ran the sound and she sat about three feet from me and she ended up asking me out."

The couple has three children: Brewer, 4, Isabella, 5, and Henderson, 8. The theatre bug has already bitten Isabella and Henderson who were both in Music Man. "Izzie is hilarious on stage and it seems to 'click' with her," Jones said. Henderson attends many of the shows and already knows how to run the pin rail (where the background scenery is dropped) for his father.

The Bama Theatre maintains a robust schedule year round starting in early January and running through the special Christmas Eve show.

July offers a little slack time, but Jones barely has time to catch his breath before another production takes center stage at the historic site. "Just about everybody hires me to do sound or run lights. There are a couple of gospel groups who bring in their own stuff, and I'll come in to check on them to make sure they have power and everything they need."

Jones enjoys working for all the shows, but the time he puts in with The Actor's Charitable Theatre is particularly satisfying. The group does three or four shows a year and Jones says The ACT has really high



standards.

"We did Les Mis in December and it was phenomenal. We are continually pushing the envelope on what we need to do and what we can do to have professional shows down there."

Many of The ACT's shows utilize Broadway lighting which offers more options and is more work, but more fun to program, according to Jones.

"I think for Les Mis we had 490 lighting cues, but it was totally worth it," he said. "The stage manager actually ran that. I

had to program the lighting cues. That's what takes forever because we have five moving head fixtures in there and 32 LEDs. We have 80 conventional fixtures plus the LEDs, so we can do any color under the sun. We can do so much more than we could five years ago."

Choosing the favorite part of his job is easy for Jones. "The best part of my job is opening night," he said. "Everything comes together that night for big shows. For the shows that I've put a week of work into, opening night is special; the largest crowd, everybody's into it. You know you cross your fingers and hope everything works. I'm more anxious about equipment failures. A microphone not working properly is always a concern. Lighting is not much of an issue because it is all computerized and we've run it and run it to make sure it is right. And we tweak lighting cues up until the last minute. Opening night is always the best night."

Even when the stage is dark and no show is scheduled, Jones is often at the Bama Theatre, tinkering with equipment, changing light bulbs, or merely cleaning up. "I'll put some Pink Floyd over the PA and do something. It's a release to be in there by myself, hanging lights or whatever. That's my getaway time. There is something about that place." ★

Margaret Clevenger's work has appeared in many newspapers and magazines including Alabama Heritage, Mississippi Magazine, Pennsylvania Magazine, and Southern Lady. She has a story, "Whistling Past the Graveyard" in the anthology Tuscaloosa Tales: Stories of Tuscaloosa and its People. She is a regular contributor to Jubilation.