

CULTURE

From Whirlpool design engineer to Barter resident playwright

Catherine Bush once designed vacuum cleaners. Now she writes plays, including a new musical that opens Saturday in Abingdon.



by **Susan Cameron**
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Catherine Bush. Courtesy of Catherine Bush.

ABINGDON — Catherine Bush had no intention of becoming a playwright.

She graduated from Eastern Kentucky University with a degree in industrial technology, which she describes as the “design aspect of engineering versus engineering itself.”

She once worked at Whirlpool.

During a visit to England in 1987, she saw a production of “The Phantom of the Opera” in the West End of London.

She was hooked.

“I was dazzled and fell in love with the magic of live theater,” she said.

That experience led her to subscribe to the Broadway touring shows that performed in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Around 1990, she got involved with community theater in Danville, Kentucky, working backstage before becoming an actor.

“The first time someone laughed at something my character said I felt my life change,” she said. “I became even more obsessed with theater and knew I would never be happy until I gave it a shot.”

Those at West T. Hill Community Theatre were very encouraging of her work, “although I’m certain they shouldn’t have been,” she said, laughing.

At the age of 30, she made the big move to New York to study acting after she was accepted into the American Academy of Dramatic Arts.

But she says she wasn’t very good. While looking for acting work, she remembered a teacher who asked her students what they planned to do while they waited for the phone to ring.

“We all just kind of sat there. And she said, ‘You’re going to write. The world needs more playwrights.’ And I kind of remembered that when the phone wasn’t ringing,” Bush said.

Although she’d never had a writing class, done any writing other than papers for school and never studied playwriting, she went to Central Park and started writing. Eventually, she gave up acting and turned all her attention to writing.

Nearly 30 years later, Bush, now 59, is the prolific playwright-in-residence at the Barter Theatre in Abingdon, where her latest play, “Kentucky Spring,” is set to premiere on April 23.

Ask Bush how many plays she’s written and she can’t give you the exact number.

“It’s upwards of 40 getting close to 50,” said Bush, who writes adaptations and original plays for adult and younger audiences.

A native of Battle Creek, Michigan, she is the seventh of 11 children who moved to Kentucky when she was 13. She began writing about the Bluegrass State after seeing a play written by Horton Foote, a native Texan who often set his stories in a fictional town in Texas.

No one was writing plays about Kentucky, she said.

“Either you’re a playwright living in Appalachia or you’re a playwright writing about Appalachia, which is what I was doing,” she said.

Cast of "Kentucky Spring." Courtesy of Barter Theatre.

Barter Theatre

Her collaboration with Barter began in 2003, when one of her plays was chosen for a public reading at the theater's Appalachian Festival of Plays & Playwrights. The annual event promotes and celebrates Appalachian plays and those who write them.

She and her father drove down for the reading and she found herself immediately drawn to the town of Abingdon.

Her participation in the festival led to her work with the Barter, the state theater of Virginia.

After she wrote several plays for Barter, Rick Rose, the theater's former producing artistic director, likely decided it would be cheaper to name her the playwright-in-residence, according to Bush. In 2007, she happily moved to Abingdon, where she still lives.

The shows she's written for the Barter include "The Three Musketeers," "The Other Side of the Mountain," "The Quiltmaker," "Dracula," "Peter Pan" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow." She has also written several Christmas plays, including "Jingle All the Way" and "Frosty."

Katy Brown, Barter's current producing artistic director, said Bush was chosen because "she wrote the audience favorite so many times, that when we were seeking a playwright in residence, we called her first."

In the role, she has written a number of plays for Barter on commission, helped develop plays others have written, adapted stories for the stage, written the theater's study guides for student audiences and created work specifically for Barter's company of actors, Brown said.

"Having a playwright here at the theater makes the development of new work easier and better on every front," she added.

Bush calls her relationship with the theater a "stroke of luck and good fortune."

About Catherine Bush

Age: 59

Residence: Michigan native, now lives in Abingdon

Position: Playwright-in-residence at Barter Theatre

Latest play: "Kentucky Spring"

What's next? Writing a Christmas play and an adaptation of "Cinderella"

Hobbies: Walking, refinishing furniture, baking pies

Current priority: Moving into the house she recently bought

Bonus: She wrote a play about the Charlottesville riots that has yet to be produced and staged

For more information:
catherinebushplays.com

“I’m the luckiest person in the world,” she said.

Like many who’ve experienced theater at Barter, she considers it special.

Because the actors live locally, there is a closeness with the community, she said.

The actors are also professionals, she noted.

“This is what they do for a living. They work at their craft all the time – so they’re good,” Bush said.

And Barter is telling stories of this region that no one else is doing “so that’s what makes it so awesome,” she said.

Once her shows are featured at Barter, many go on to be staged at other theaters. But no theater ever does a better job with a play than Barter, Bush said.

“I think the win-win situations are when you go see a show that’s been done at Barter ... and they do it really well, but Barter did it better. ... The home team still did it better, you know?”

Barter and live theater in general excel at being three-dimensional and no two performances are the same, Bush said.

“When you’re in a theater ... where people are exposing their hearts and souls to other characters on stage, it’s not like being in the movies. It’s not flat, it’s three-dimensional. And the audience, their heartbeats all sync up with each other and with the characters on stage. ... It’s been proven,” she said referring to a study done in London in 2017 that studied the heartbeats of audiences watching live theater and found they were beating in unison.

The playwright is often inspired both for an idea and a play name by a famous line from a movie, song or book such as the holiday tune “All I want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth,” and “I’ll Never Be Hungry Again,” a Scarlett O’Hara line from “Gone with the Wind.”

Which of her plays is her favorite? She has many, but she is particularly proud of “Tradin’ Paint,” a comedy/drama centered on the world of stock car racing.

Poster for “Kentucky Spring.” Courtesy of Barter Theatre.

‘Kentucky Spring’

Her latest work, “Kentucky Spring,” has been years in the making, with portions written intermittently and then set aside when other projects took priority.

The musical is about a young woman who lives in Appalachia but yearns for the big city. When she returns to help her grandmother sell the family farm, she discovers it was where she was always meant to be.

Bush said the story is about “memory and longing and the land drawing us back.” It touches on the theme of whether young people who live in Appalachia want to stay there.

“Anyone who has ever lived here can tell you that these mountains call you back,” said Brown.

If you go:

What: “Kentucky Spring”

When: April 23–May 22

Where: Gilliam Stage, Barter Theater, Abingdon

Tickets: \$20–\$49

For more information, visit

bartertheatre.com/big-shows/kentucky-spring/

“This play captures the magic of this place better than any play I’ve ever seen. The music is just stunning – it makes my eyes water. Right now, people need a way to connect with what makes life worth living. The story reminds us to live as who we really are, to embrace the life we are living right now.”

Brown said Bush is “world-class at dialogue and adaptation – two skills that are very difficult to learn or teach. Her sense of comedy has changed Barter for the better – even her dramatic pieces have a humor to them that Barter’s audiences love. And best of all, she has an incredible ability to depict Appalachia in an authentic way.”

“Glorious” is the word Bush uses to describe the play’s music and lyrics, which were written by Dax Dupuy.

She hopes those who don’t normally frequent the theater will use “Kentucky Spring” as a reason to go to Barter, which she described as “blue-collar theater.” People may be intimidated by the theater because they think it’s formal and they have to dress up, Bush said. She encouraged people to just go to see a play in comfortable clothes and enjoy themselves.

There have been many stories written about Appalachia recently that are negative, dealing with issues such as methamphetamine addiction and the demise of coal. Though she said those subjects are important and the stories are well done, people need something positive these days. “Kentucky Spring” is uplifting, she said.

Those who attend the show will leave the theater singing and dancing, according to the playwright.

“This play is a story that celebrates everything we love,” Bush said. “It celebrates our music. It celebrates our dance. It celebrates our storytelling. It celebrates our humor. ... I hope people will use that as a springboard to start a relationship with Barter.”