

Koonce lured to theater with lead role in college

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Growing up on a Pickens County farm that featured plenty of major attractions – cows, chickens and pigs ranking as the most memorable – Betty Jean “B.J.” Koonce had the opportunity to fall in love with South Carolina’s rural outdoor life.

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She passed.

“I’m not a good farmer,” Koonce admits.

While her parents enjoyed the challenges of raising crops and livestock, Koonce’s fascination was fixed on the faces of people. While joining in a handful of plays at her church as a youngster and at Easley High as a teen, she was drawn to the challenge of connecting with the audience.

In her sophomore year at Clemson University, the instructor of an oral interpretation class offered extra credit to those willing to audition for the performance of “Lystrada” in 1970. Koonce, very much to her surprise, landed the lead role.

“I think I was the only one with an authentic Southern drawl,” Koonce says, still trying to explain how she became the lead character.

For Koonce, an English major, it was the unofficial beginning of a lifetime addiction that continues today.

It is on display weekly in her role as executive director of Centre Stage – a job that combines her love of theater with some business skills developed over the years.

Koonce calls it “the most fulfilling job she’s ever had.” And the most frustrating.

With auditions and performances spanning 12 months a year, the directorship of the audience-friendly, 285-seat theater is an all-consuming role.

She was asked to step in as executive director at Centre Stage in July 2004, a few months after founder and longtime artistic director Doug McCoy suffered a stroke. McCoy, who died in March 2005, had served as the artistic director since the organization’s inception in 1983.

“I never had aspirations to do anything like this,” Koonce says of her role, which involves very little of her true love – acting – and far more time in such things as finance, marketing and promotions.

Koonce was an obvious choice, however, because she knew the theater business.

Over a period of 20 years, she had directed, acted, operated lights and served on the Centre Stage governing board.

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She is one of the founders of The Warehouse Theatre, serving on that board as president in the theater’s inaugural season in its new home on Augusta Street.

Koonce, who had worked in advertising, marketing, audio/visual production and staging for more than 21 years as vice president of Spectrum South, left that role in 1997 to become a voiceover artist.

She was the voice in commercials for local, regional and national accounts in addition to narrations for film and video.

“It was like all my life experiences had come together,” says Koonce, who typically devotes her days to things like marketing and production management – then tries to squeeze in the performance-oriented aspects at night.

“It’s not a 9-to-5 job. I might have to work 9 to 5 to get the business end done – then work on other things at night, when the cast is here rehearsing or performing,” says Koonce, who serves as artistic director.

More familiar with the performing side of the job when she stepped into the role, Koonce has been surprised to find that she also enjoys the business side.

“I actually enjoy crunching the numbers, and doing analysis and research,” says Koonce, whose greatest time demand is in researching potential projects for the following season.

“Play selection is the most difficult part of the job,” says Koonce, who typically reads more than 200 plays a year as she plans each new season.

Koonce leads a staff of six, which is kept busy with seven annual productions, some of them running as long as four weekends. In her first three years in the role, theater membership doubled – which enabled Koonce to triple the size of the staff and double the size of the operating budget.

“We stay busy,” says Koonce, whose 2008-09 season ends with 15 performances of “Country Queens – Nashville’s Leading Ladies,” which begins Aug. 6 and ends Aug. 29.

The 2009-10 season starts in September.

“There is no ‘off-season.’ We’re at it year-round,” Koonce says.

Sounds a little like farming.



Betty Jean “B.J.” Koonce (GEORGE GARDNER/Staff)



B.J. Koonce is executive director of the audience-friendly, 285-seat Centre Stage theater. (GEORGE GARDNER/Staff)