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Rejoicing in their temporary roles

For some Washingtonians, the holidays offer a chance to release their inner performer

BY STEVE HENDRIX

At work, Dick Kovar is unobtrusive. And at 85, the veteran intelligence analyst is fine with being the soft-spoken gent in the conservative suit, half a century older than many of his co-workers.

"They hardly ever hear a word from me," Kovar said of the CIA office where he works as a contractor.

But then comes December, and Kovar the Quiet whips off the unassuming mask to reveal the showman within. Each year, he takes the stage with the Christmas Revels, one of several holiday extravaganzas in the area that give hundreds of ordinary Washingtonians a chance to sing and dance — and occasionally stage fight — in front of a mass audience.

"This year, I get thrown to the



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Patent examiner Celia Murphy performs in the Christmas Revels extravaganza. ■ More photos at washingtonpost.com.

ground in one of the scenes," Kovar said during a rehearsal at Lisner Auditorium, where he was wearing makeup and a rakish eye patch and looking nothing like the eminence grise he plays at his day job. "My wife is not going to like that when she finds out."

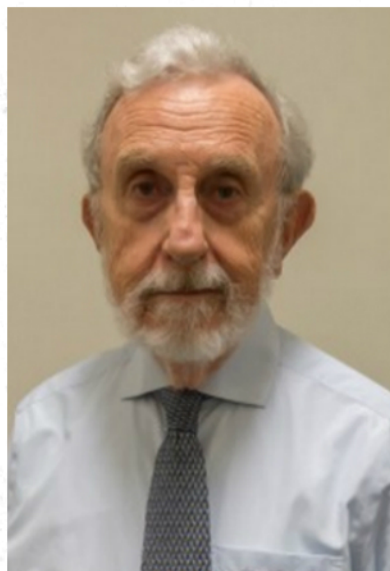
In a city where professional performers fill stages all year long, the holidays offer a chance for talented amateurs to take their star turn. Bus drivers, bureaucrats and even the guy who yells "All rise" at D.C. Superior Court, they all shed their salaried selves for a few nights under the fabulous lights of theaters, concert halls and churches around the region.

"It's like I become a different person," said Kovar, a natural baritone, whose last stage work before joining the Revels in 1993 was playing the villain in a school

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"Going onstage transports you to a whole other world. Somehow having that part of myself fulfilled makes me feel complete."

Zoe Alexandratos, a Montessori school teacher who performs with the Christmas Revels



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Dick Kovar, left photos, spends most of the year as an intelligence analyst, but in December he takes the stage with the Christmas Revels. "This year, I get thrown to the ground in one of the scenes," he says. At right, Celia Murphy, a supervisory patent examiner who plays an Irish immigrant in the Christmas Revels show, prepares for rehearsal.

Holiday season heralds opportunity for local amateurs

play in 1947. "There is something about dressing in a costume that enables you to come out of yourself."

Jerry Lee, 59, spends his weeks as a financial systems support guy for AARP, and other than his childhood church choir back in Georgia, has no résumé as a performer. But for the past 22 Decembers, he has planned his calendar around performing in the Christmas show of the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington.

This year, backed by the 200-member chorus, he plays a singing Santa in the boisterous Lincoln Theatre show that runs through Sunday. In one number, Lee and a string of dancers do a version of "Favorite Son" from "The Will Rogers Follies," including some high-stepping kick lines.

"It gets pretty taxing, surrounded by all the foam rubber," Lee said. "Sadly, I need less foam rubber than I used to."

It's all a big, and welcome, shift from office routine.

"Right now, I have a stack of internal policy documents on my desk that is *so* not Santa," he said.

Robin Costanza also separates her job-self and her alto-self. Few people in her choir know she drives a Fairfax County school bus, and none of her little passengers know she will be Good King Wenceslas-ing this weekend as part of the Washington National Cathedral Choir's yearly Christmas show. It's the group's biggest performance of the year, usually drawing about 4,000 people over three shows, and Costanza, 49, has been doing it for decades.

"To me, it's never truly the holiday season until you sing 'Hark! The Herald Angels Sing' at

the Cathedral," she said. "There is nothing like that organ. If you don't tear up, there is something wrong with you."

These avid amateurs don their stage apparel each December for a variety of reasons, from a simple love of singing to scratching a long-ignored showbiz itch.

Zoe Alexandratos thought about going pro when she was young. She was an accomplished musical-theater performer in Arlington and loved to bask in the applause of an approving audience. She believed she had the pipes to make a living at it, but ultimately, she did not have the single-mindedness of the truly star-struck. A mother of one son and a teacher at a Montessori school in Frederick, Md., she is happy with her chosen path. But she sometimes misses the magic.

"Going onstage transports you to a whole other world," said Alexandratos. "Somehow having that part of myself fulfilled makes me feel complete."

She revived that part when she auditioned for a Christmas Revels show in 2010. Now she is in her sixth performance with the troupe and in the thick of its annual massive theatrical endeavor.

The Revels, which typically sells 10,000 seats over two weekends, has been producing the annual holiday revue of traditional music from around the world since 1983. This year's Irish-themed show, which has two performances Saturday and two Sunday, features a cast and crew of nearly 300. Most of the perform-

ers are local amateurs, but the director as well as the set and costume designers for the \$250,000 production are professionals.

"This is enough," Alexandratos said during a rehearsal at Lisner as techs in headsets rushed around the crowded set. "I don't need to be out there waiting tables and trying to make it as a performer."

Music has been big from the beginning for Ed Hoover, who was born to a pianist mother and a jazz trumpeter father. He sang in the chorus at Texas A&M University, but by the time he came to the District a decade ago, he was firmly on the corporate track. He was delighted to discover that Washington is rich in choirs and immediately auditioned for the 170-singer Choral Arts Chorus. The group's signature holiday performance, "A Capital Christmas," plays the Kennedy Center over four dates ending Dec. 24.

"It's just very cool to get up in front of a packed house in one of the world's premier venues," said Hoover, 38, a tenor who works in corporate communications for McLean-based Mars. (He has been known to bring M&Ms by the sack-full for rehearsals, which began in early November.)

At work, the idea of performing makes him feel choked behind his necktie.

"My co-workers are always saying 'Sing something for us,'" said Hoover. "I tell them, 'It's 10,000-times easier for me to stand onstage than it would be to sing for you here.'"

Having the curtain go up can be a terrifying experience for non-professionals, especially the first few times they take the stage. Kovar said one of his cast mates literally shoved him into position on his debut opening night in 2010.

"It's a bit of shocker when you first get out there," said Craig Haimson, a cognitive systems engineer who is in his second Christmas Revels. "It helps that I'm nearsighted, and we're not allowed to wear glasses onstage."

Haimson, 40, had a few music gigs in his 20s, singing in a garage band in Boston. But work and family filled his time, and the only singing he did for 20 years was around his Silver Spring house. For his family, the stage version of their father and husband was a revelation.

"I was just amazed," said his wife, Michaela Spehn. "He looked so comfortable and so happy. Our son said, 'There's my silly daddy up there!'"

In a few days, the curtains will go down, the lights will go out and the holiday performers will go home. Many of them say these shows make their Christmas, but when they are done there is still Christmas to make.

"I haven't even started my Christmas shopping yet," said Celia Murphy, a supervisory patent examiner who plays an Irish immigrant in the Revels. She has a weekend of shows to go before her yearly theater career is over. "Thankfully, my husband already put the tree up."

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