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Curtain calls

Playhouse helps make theater special

Story: DONALD CALAMIA
Photos: STEPHEN CANTRELL

Throughout its 56 years of existence, the Village Players of Birmingham has earned a reputation as being one of the most special amateur theaters in Michigan.

"The group was founded in 1923 by a group of people at St. James Church," said long-time member William McCall, "and by 1925, our present facility was built."

"We think our building is probably the best facility of any small theater in

the state and probably the Midwest. Most community theaters don't even have a building of their own. We're very fortunate to have such an excellent facility."

The Chestnut street playhouse, designed and built by group members, has had additions built onto it three times since. The building has a large costume shop, an electrical shop, a paint shop and a spacious scenery loft. "We can even fly our sets in and out of the state, which few amateur theaters can do," McCall said.

The Village Players of Birmingham

is not a community theater, McCall insists, but a private club. Members must be at least 21 years of age. Potential members must be recommended by three club members. Residency in Birmingham is not required.

"WE'RE LOOKING for people who want to do more than just act," McCall said. "We want people who love to get involved in building and painting the sets, cleaning up the kitchen and trimming the garden. We've had people join us who just want to be on the stage."

"They generally don't last very long. As far as we're concerned, acting is just the frosting on the cake."

The Village Players has 325 members, of whom 60 participate on each production.

"Our members come from all walks of life," McCall said. "We have doctors, lawyers, peddlers and waiters. In fact, one of our best actors was a mailman."

"A few years ago when we were doing 'My Fair Lady,' we had a marvelous English woman play the role of Eliza Doolittle. Come to find out, this woman actually lived the life of Miss Doolittle."

"She was a Cockney who, in order to get a job, went to a voice coach to learn how to speak proper English."

THE GROUP IS also experiencing a surge in third generation members.

"A large number of kids in their '20s whose parents and grandparents are members, are now joining the players," McCall said.

"We generally have a high turnover of people, and if we don't get these young people involved, we're going to be in trouble."

"Besides, it helps keep us old-timers on our toes."

To encourage young people to join, junior members between the ages of 21-27 are given a break on membership dues. They have all the privileges of active members except they cannot hold office.

The group presents five shows each season for the public. It also puts on



Howard Beer, Dohi Diehl (center) and Paulette Slayden are in the cast of Hart and Kaufman's classic comedy "You Can't Take It With You." Performances will be given Friday-Sunday, Jan. 18-20, and Friday-Saturday, Jan. 25-26, at the playhouse on Chestnut at Hunter in Birmingham.

"The major attraction to the players for many of the members is the social life. For my wife and me, most of our social life revolves around the players and its people."

— William McCall, second-generation member

three-five pot-luck shows for the members' amusement.

"The major attraction to the players for many of the members is the social life. For my wife and me, most of our social life revolves around the players and its people," McCall said.

"This is a very good group, very so-

ciable, and it's due to the diversity of its people. It's fun working with amateurs."

"The worst thing for us is when we get the semi-professional in the group. They aren't nearly as much fun."

McCALL, WHO himself is a second generation member, became involved

with the players in 1936. He officially became a member in 1948 and served as the group's president 15 years ago. McCall serves as co-chairman of the long-range planning committee.

The Village Players hopes to add a rehearsal hall to its facility. About one quarter of the money needed already has been raised.

"We've been blessed more than many other groups. We're entirely self-sufficient."

"We've never had to go out and get assistance for anything, and we want to stay that way. We're proud of what we've accomplished, and we're looking forward to the future," McCall said.

Further information about the Village Players of Birmingham is available by calling 642-5016.



Helen Shalvey (left) and Priscilla Sommers rehearse a scene from the Village Players of Birmingham's upcoming production "You Can't Take It With You."



Getting Around

By ETHEL SIMMONS

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"Hometown Heroes" get a chance to show their stuff, musically, on a new radio show of that name, broadcast every Saturday afternoon on radio station, WPON, Pontiac (1450 AM).

Three area residents who are all professional musicians are behind the show. Scott Forbes of Rochester and Tom Hollyer of Bloomfield Hills, co-hosts, and Dennis Forbes, engineer and associate producer.

At one time, the men all played together in a country rock band called Puddlefoot, with Dennis on guitar and vocals; Tom on lead guitar, banjo and mandolin; and Scott as bass player and singer/songwriter.

Mostly the guys played in Ann Arbor, East Lansing, Grand Rapids, and as the house band two summers at the Pilot House on Mackinac Island. They also are recognizable to area music fans from their performances at such local spots as the Wagon Wheel in Troy.

TOM HOLLYER is co-owner of Music, Strings 'n' Things music shop in Birmingham, sponsor of "Hometown Heroes."

Hollyer said that during the show he doesn't mention his partnership in Music, Strings 'n' Things. "Most people seem to know," he acknowledged, "but I think it would sound tacky on the air."

There's only one 60-second commercial during the half-hour show, broadcast from 2-2:30 p.m. Hollyer said they've had requests from potential sponsors but "we don't need any more spots."

Scott Forbes has a tie-in with the radio station itself, working in sales at WPON. He said, "I would like to mention the president of WPON, Steve Peterson. He was open-minded enough to let the show go on during a prime spot."

Dennis Forbes calls on his job-related skills, for he's employed as a recording engineer in a studio, Good Vibrations, in Southfield.

All week long the "Hometown Heroes" trio listens to music, and then tapes the show for weekend broadcast.

"THE RESPONSE has been great," Scott Forbes said. "We've gotten tapes from Ann Arbor, Romeo, Southfield, Dearborn, Detroit, Royal Oak and Birmingham."

Radio show gives local talent a break



Brothers Scott (left) and Dennis Forbes (right) write and produce jingles, which Tom Hollyer (center) plays on; the three wrote "It's Easy as KFC."

"The station covers a 45-mile circle, and anyone in the area can send us material."

Each show offers music by four or five different artists and approximately 15 three songs by the "featured artist."

"Diane Fisher of Rochester, a singer/songwriter, says her bookings have gone up since being on the show," Scott said.

Other featured artists have included Tom Lee, singer/songwriter of Sylvan Lake; Dan Schafer, singer/songwriter, formerly of Dearborn and now of Nashville; and Trigger, a middle-of-the-road group from Union Lake.

More featured artists are Albrecht, Roley and Moore, from the Birmingham area, with country rock; Brussel Sprouts of Monroe, country rock; Freddy Butson of Waterford, a country singer/songwriter; and the Salisdo Brothers of Romeo, a singer/songwriter group.

WPON basically offers "modern country" music, such as by Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers. "Hometown Heroes" plays light rock and light jazz ("not heavy rock, or eclectic jazz — our listeners wouldn't listen," said Hollyer).

"WHEN WE WERE playing profes-

sionally, there was no place to be heard," according to Hollyer. "There was no local show."

Musicians interested in having their songs played on the show can send tapes to: Music, Strings 'n' Things, 1810 S. Woodward, Birmingham 48011, or WPON, P.O. Box 1460, Bloomfield Hills 48013.

Area Sweet Adelines encourage new members

Several area residents have extended an invitation for women who like to sing and would like to learn the art of barbershop harmony.

Julene Fabrizio, assistant director of the Macon County chorus of Sweet Adelines, will be present at a special guest night at 8 p.m. Tuesday, Jan. 22, at Ford High School, 11911 Clinton River Road, Sterling Heights. She will demonstrate and explain barbershop music. She is a resident of West Bloom-

field. "There's a lot of good talent in Detroit, and a lot of good recording by Detroit artists. A lot of Detroiters have made it," Hollyer said.

"People (the public) have the idea if they're local, they're not as good. It's just not true."

"Hometown Heroes" has been on the air since Dec. 1.

Gayle Smith of Bloomfield Hills and Sue Gleason and Sandy Marhof of Troy also will be present to welcome prospective Sweet Adelines. They will help to describe Sweet Adelines, an international four-part harmony group for women.

Any woman who would like to participate in Sweet Adelines' shows, performances and competitions may call Linda Shaffer at 791-6106 or Lynn Patzelt at 468-1920 for further information.

Show 'Oliver' earns ovation

By GAY ZIEGER

The audience rose en masse after the final curtain of "Oliver," now playing at Detroit's Alger Live Theatre, and it wasn't because of any particular hurry to get home.

In part it was in tribute to Shannon Burrows, in the title role, who was celebrating a 10th birthday, complete with cake from the cast. The tribute also was because the audience liked what it had seen.

The reaction was a bit generous, for the play was rather drawn out, often bordering on being plodding and precarious. A few of the actors simply weren't up to their parts.

Their singing voices lacked intensity, their speaking voices clarity. The stumbling and fumbling were annoying. Often the spirit seemed forced.

BUT THEN there was Oliver, Fagin, the Artful Dodger and Bill Sikes, all characters with spark who, happily, had performers able to convey this.

Shannon Burrows of Birmingham showed that she had a grasp on Oliver and seemed to enjoy bringing him to the audience. Her voice, while not lusty, was pure and tinged with a youthful earnestness. She looked sweet and vulnerable, yet she threw her entire being into Oliver's battle with an adversary. She exuded confidence and energy and obviously has a theatrical future.

Her mentor in pick pocketing, the Artful Dodger, was played with great williness by Heather Cross. She summoned up memories of Our Gang comedy with her slightly naughty, worldly wise demeanor.

She had a cute voice, a cute face and an especially cute reaction to being kissed on the cheek by Denyse Wickline, as one of the Netherland ladies.

The all-vill Bill Sikes was portrayed most sinisterly by Michael Drake. He made it clear that his words were to be heeded. When he received his just reward, there were cheers.

Perhaps the greatest audience affinity was for Peter Sonberg as Fagin. His dramatic flair, attention to details of manner, graceful dancer-like movements, and adeptness involving the audience through gestures and shared amusement made him endearing.

IN A REAL COUP, he managed to divert attention from his accidentally knocked-off hairpiece by focusing on it.

review

A young cast member, displaying incredible stage presence, tracked down the wayward wig, placed it gingerly on the old man's head, and gave it a pat here and there.

Sonberg muttered something about his hairdresser, walked off center stage, and with a great flourish assumed a characteristically Faginesque pose that assured the audience that the situation was in control.

In another fine moment, the most purely lyrical of the evening, four street vendors, Beth Stevenson, John Jaisle, Kim McLeod and Amy Purrenhaug, sang "Who Will Buy This Wonderful Morning?" One wished that there had been more substantial roles for them.

Note also the scruffy orphan chorus. They looked marvelous, enunciated well and projected nicely. They helped us through the faltering times and gave good support to the stronger sequences. Additional performances will be held Friday and Saturday, Jan. 18-19.

Series offers Bogart film

Sex, suspense, adventure and intrigue spice the film "Beat the Devil," to be shown Monday and Tuesday at 8 p.m., Jan. 28 and 29, at the Cranbrook Institute of Science auditorium, 500 Lone Pine Road, Bloomfield Hills.

Humphrey Bogart heads the international cast in the 1954 John Huston production, which is best known as a satire.

Discussion moderator will be Cranbrook School English faculty member Dr. Fred Roth.

Tickets, available at the door, include the film and its commentary, an open discussion, program notes and a gourmet dessert with coffee served at 7:30 p.m.

The showing is sponsored by Cranbrook P.M. and Encore Cinema Club. Proceeds go to Cranbrook and Kingswood Schools Mothers Clubs and scholarship programs.

For more information, call 645-3633.