

Former accountant is stage struck

His work goes on behind the stage curtains

By SUSAN TAUBER

If John E. Miller had stuck with his first career decision, he'd be sitting in a different office, wearing different clothes and telling different stories about his work.

But because he's a stage manager rather than an accountant, he's sitting back stage at Meadow Brook Music Festival pavilion, wearing a black T-shirt, telling tales about people like Jack Cassidy and Shirley Jones.

Miller's been stage manager for Meadow Brook Music Festival and Meadow Brook Theatre at Oakland University in Avon Township for four years. He's responsible for everything that goes on behind the curtain — from lights to sound to props to backdrops.

Working behind a stage curtain wasn't Miller's idea of a career, however.

"In 1940, I was an accountant working in Detroit for Jam Handy. I got that job after graduating in 1939 from Detroit Institute of Technology. I wasn't making enough money and decided I needed another activity if I wanted to raise a family. So I got a job through Jam Handy working as a stage hand after work," said the gray-bearded Miller.

He remembers his first stage hand job. It was at Detroit's Lafayette Theater, one of the few legitimate theaters that didn't feature burlesque shows.

"THE FIRST THING I had to do

was string an Austrian curtain that was 28-feet tall and 50-feet wide," he recalled. "The curtain had a series of chains in intervals of eight feet, all laced with wire loops and three-inch wooden balls between the loops."

Once Miller, who told his age by saying he has a 33-year-old son, got a taste of theater life, he decided he wanted more.

Over the years, he proceeded to work for several companies, getting experience in every aspect of stage work.

Stage work, he explained, means moving material from one place to another and setting up the show so that "everything works."

"I worked at all the television stations in Detroit, including Wilding where industrial films were made. This was when I was still working every day at Jam Handy as an accountant."

He did all this while living with his wife and four children in Davison, a town 70 miles north of the Jam Handy location.

He got to work by driving his car 42 miles south to Pontiac, taking a commuter train to the Milwaukee Street station and then walking to his office on Grand Boulevard.

IF HE MISSED the last train home at 11:39 p.m., he hitched a ride.

"I'm too old for all that now," Miller confessed. He lives in a condominium in Mount Clemens.

It wasn't until 1967 that Miller left his work at Jam Handy. He traveled

throughout England, France, Italy and Spain for three months, not attending theaters.

While at Handy, after giving up his accounting career in 1968, the member of Detroit Stage Employees Local became in charge of sales and services for all audio-visual equipment in the project department. He moved up to technical director of the live show department.

Miller later got experience as stage manager for live industrial shows for such businesses as Chevrolet, Radio Corp. of America (RCA), Whirlpool, Xerox, Owens-Corning, Coca-Cola, taking shows around the country to different theaters and hotel ballrooms.

He did back stage preparatory work for Northwest Studio and A.F. Ronell, work he continues even today.

In 1968, he worked on commercials for General Television Association then went to Intramedia, Inc. in 1969, where he worked as vice-president in charge of productions marketing audio-visual equipment.

"I WORKED so many varieties of jobs," Miller remarked.

Working all these jobs provided him with interesting stories to tell, like the one about Jack Cassidy when he and Shirley Jones were starring in "Maggie Flynn" at the Fisher Theater.

"It was a matinee performance. On stage was a two-story interior of a house with a circular stairway. Standing on the stairway were 15 children.

All of a sudden the building started to fall. We dropped a black drop so the audience wouldn't see what was happening but they could hear the children screaming."

"While all of this was going on, Jack Cassidy went out in front of the curtain and started singing to distract the audience from what was going on," Miller said.

No one was hurt, he added, but the evening performance had to be cancelled so the stage crew could reinforce the wall.

Over a 10-year period, from 1964-74, Miller opened and closed the Music Hall for different managers five times.

"First the hall opened as a cinema. That didn't make it. Then two priests donated thousands of dollars to make it a family film theater. That folded. Another company tried bringing in black concerts. After that it became a movie theater but closed again."

AFTER THE MUSIC HALL started bringing in live theater, it survived.

It was at the Detroit hall that Miller met Leon Petrus, former manager of Meadow Brook Music Festival. It was Petrus who later hired Miller as stage manager for the festival and theater.

As stage manager, it's Miller's job to supervise his crews backstage. During the music festival this means organizing everything behind the curtains for a different performance at least four nights a week during the nine-week season.

Thursday, Saturdays and Sunday

nights, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra performs. Friday nights are reserved for jazz groups.

Miller is challenged by a different play every four weeks when working at Meadow Brook Theatre.

Regardless of the season, Miller works from "8 a.m. to midnight" at least five days a week, dining constantly on restaurant food.

"On my nights off, my wife and I usually go out to dinner," he said. "During the winter months on Mondays a group of friends take turns having dinner at others houses."

Even though Miller has worked with star-studded names in both the classical and popular worlds of entertainment, he said he isn't impressed by famous people.

"STARS HAVE NEVER impressed me," he said, while seated in his backstage office with its hospital-green walls, a television set, small refrigerator and a desk covered with potato chips and papers.

"The only two stars I ever got friendly with are Tony Bennett and Fred Waring, and that's only because I've worked with them so many times. I'm not impressed with classical music, either," he added.

He does like his job, however. "It's always a challenge," Miller said. "I have no regrets of my choice of careers."

For those interested in pursuing a career backstage, Miller said it's enjoyable work "but it's not a life for a married person who expects to have any time with his family."

One of Miller's children almost followed in her father's footsteps.

"When my youngest daughter was 6 months old, she was in a sales film for Gerber's Baby Food. She was a fat little cherub," he remembered.

She gave up show business after that and is now an accountant.

If Miller hadn't gotten a job as an accountant at Jam Handy, he said he'd probably still be at Chrysler Corp.

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