

Tattoo Players boost musicals for children

By DONALD V. CALAMIA

Though the names Robert S. Leider and Laurie R. Sears are not yet household words, their group, the Tattoo Players, is quickly gaining the reputation as being one of this country's foremost theaters specializing in original children's musicals.

The Tattoo Players will present two free performances Saturday at Orchard Mall in West Bloomfield. "Goldie and the Bears" is scheduled for 1 p.m. and "Hansel and Gretel & Co." at 3 p.m.

"We used to sit around and talk about how disgusting musical theater for children was," said Leider, who resides in Oak Park. "It was really boring, so we set out to upgrade it."

The first collaboration was an original version of the 1938 Errol Flynn "Robin Hood" movie. Leider, who was directing shows for the City of Oak Park at the time, had always been itching to do something original.

"I wrote quite a bit of the play and I gave it to someone who, at that time, really wasn't interested in composing for musical theater," Leider recalled. "Not long after that, I came to work and found Laurie at the piano. It turned out that Laurie got hold of my script and was interested in composing it. "We put "Robin Hood" up in 14 days, running stream and all!"

THAT WAS in the summer of 1974. By the end of that same year, they had created another play, "The Horrible Things at Home."

According to Leider, "This new show was light years away from 'Robin Hood.' It was about a group of lovable beasts who are more noble than people."

In January 1975 came the adult play "Tattoo" from which the new theater group took its name.

Both Leider and Ms. Sears emphasize that all their shows are spoofs and contain all types of music. "For instance, in 'Hansel and Gretel,' you'll

find a take-off on a Pennsylvania Polka, a Carmen Miranda number and a "Hokey Pokey," Ms. Sears said. "They're all original numbers, but they maintain the flavor."

"There's always a moral to our shows, too, as well as slapstick comedy. There's never any violence, though."

To date, the team of Leider and Sears has written six musicals for children, two adult musicals, and a musical revue.

From the beginning, the Tattoo Players decided to travel with its shows instead of performing in a fixed location.

"Our shows can be slotted in a 35-minute spot in one location and can be later performed in another," Ms. Sears said. "We've played everything from pancake breakfasts to Girl Scout camps in Ortonville."

THE GROUP recently was invited to perform at the American Theater Association's spring conference in Madison, Wis., and at the Michigan Theater Association's conference in Midland.

Many of the Tattoo Players have been with the group from the start. Leider, who taught English in the Pontiac schools for six years, recruited Joe Uria and Buketa Newby from his classes. Tattoo manager Karen Sherck, who attended Michigan State University with Leider and who is a counselor at West Bloomfield High School, brought in students Greg Potter and Liz Porter; and Ms. Sears talked her sister Risa J. Sears into becoming the group's musical director.

"Our performers always contribute ideas to each show," Leider said. "We're an ensemble. We work long hard hours together on every production and it pays off. Each has his own niche in theater, and we write many of the parts specifically for the individual performers."

Recently, Leider and Ms. Sears were selected from hundreds of applicants to participate in the ASCAP/Charles Strouse Musical Theatre Writers Workshop in New York City.

"We read in Variety that the Ameri-

can Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) was offering this series taught by such Broadway luminaries as Strouse, Michael Bennett, and Stephen Sondheim, so we sent in our demonstration tape," Leider said.

"A SHORT TIME later we were notified that we were the only out-of-town group who were accepted. Of course, they thought that we'd never accept, but we flew into New York every Tuesday from November through January to attend."

"We learned more from this series than we could anywhere else. The bigger the people were who talked with us, the nicer they were."

One of the things the two learned was that theater is not growing in New York but in the regional theaters around the country. "We really have a much better chance of succeeding here than in New York," Ms. Sears said.

Soon, the Theatre of the Arts will produce the Tattoo Players shows. "In fact," Leider said, "Theatre of the Arts will be doing our play, 'Tattoo,' in one of its dinner theaters soon."

Ms. Sears explained, "All we want to do is upgrade children's musical theater. There's so much going on right now, and by working together, theater can only be bettered."

For information regarding the Tattoo Players, call 544-0733 during regular business hours.

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