

Blyth, Ontario

It's not where you would expect to find a thriving summer theater

By DENNIS ROSENBLUM

BLYTH, Ontario — Through the cornfield and across the street from the bar is the only reason most people would ever give this town a moment's notice.

It's the old town hall, where townfolk and nearby farmers flock to see professional summer theater.

To the surprise of just about everyone, the Blyth Summer Festival, now in its sixth year, has been a big success. Saturday country suppers, started last season and held before the play at a town church, quickly sold out for the season. This year, they've expanded to include suppers on Fridays and Saturdays, and lunch before the Thursday matinees, with some meals in neighboring towns.

Also, a series of theater workshops for local children as young as 6 has been expanded, facilities for the handicapped have been added, and the hall's balcony has been fixed up and opened for the first time since the festival began.

THIS ALL HAD its start with a

modest campaign by the local newspaper editor to save the old hall, built in 1920 to host traveling vaudeville shows. It had been vacant for years and the town council was considering demolishing it.

The building was renovated and became the Blyth Center for the Arts with a 400-seat theater. The performing company is all-Canadian, with many members from Toronto and others from across the country.

The turnouts are heavier than normal when it rains because the farmers can't work in the fields. The seats are filled on Saturdays but not on Fridays, which is shopping night.

"It's amazing a town of this size can handle it," said Janet Amos, the festival's artistic director who has performed in Ontario's better-known Shaw Festival and grew up in the region. "But that's really what makes it," she said. "Your audience is where you are."

Members of the cast are often stopped on the street by people who recognize them from the stage. And each spring the town gossip turns to whether so-and-so who played in such

and-such last year will be returning. "Probably the only place in Canada where there are stars is in Blyth," Ms. Amos said.

THE CLOSEST rival the theater has for a crowd is the bar, which provides a steady diet of beer and country music. In a town this size (population 814) a live theater is a giant and constant source of pride.

But a visitor expecting a formal night at the theater should be forewarned. Blyth has hardly been caught up in the heady world of entertainment. Despite the added dose of culture, it remains the same farming town it always was.

One actress told of the time a bar regular sat with a group from the theater and began lecturing on why the format of the curtain call should be changed on one of the plays he'd seen.

"You know, we did," she said. "He was right."

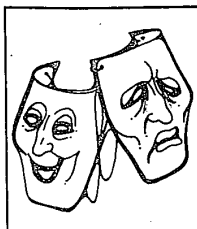
WHILE THE STAGE fare here is not that of Shakespearean Stratford (44 miles away), neither is it the Neil Simon of most summer theater.

The theater is dedicated to presenting original works by Canadians — mostly commissioned for Blyth — which are of particular relevance to the region. It's a lesson that was learned in the first year when a production of Agatha Christie's "Mousetrap" flopped.

One of last season's plays was "This Foreign Land," a sometimes funny story of Europeans emigrating to the Blyth area in 1951. Local people were interviewed for two weeks to gather stories for the script, and the subjects happily showed up to see themselves portrayed on stage.

This year's schedule includes the story of a small-town Newfoundland miner feeling pressure to move to a bigger city, a witty piece called "St. Sam of the Nuke Pile," satirizing a nuclear power development, a comedy thriller teasing "back-to-the-landers" searching for a peaceful rural living, and a musical about a World War I troupe that toured Canada.

Despite its success, the Blyth Summer



Festival appears to be in no danger of going big time. In fact, said Evalina Webster, one of the theater's biggest boosters, "We're amazed that city people come here and like the plays."

THERE'S NOT MUCH in the way of tourist business. The closest motel is eight miles away. There's a problem getting dinner for everyone on weekends.

A variety of accommodations are available with short driving distance. The famed Benmiller Inn is down the road for information, call 1-519-524-2191. Goderich, the closest city, has a few motels.

The festival office will provide a list of nearby guest homes which offer bed-and-breakfast arrangements.

Two public campgrounds are also nearby. The Falls Reserve Conservation Area in Benmiller is seven miles east of Goderich on County Road 1. It has 145 campsites and a rocky falls of sorts that feels like a whirlpool bath. Reservations are not taken, but the camp never seems to fill.

Point Farms Provincial Park, on Lake Huron, is slightly more plush and has 300 campsites. It's four miles north of Goderich on Highway 21. For information, call 1-519-524-7124 daily from 8:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.

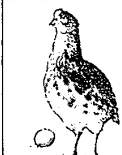
Blyth is on Highway 4, 13 miles east of Goderich. Take Highway 21 along Lake Huron from Sarnia, or Highway 4 north from London.

Shows are at 8:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays and most Mondays, with 2 p.m. Thursday matinees. Reservations are advised, although 30 tickets are held until two hours before the show. If you arrive early, just join the crowd which gathers on park benches in front of the hall to relax and talk.

For both the plays and dinners, the Blyth Summer Festival reservations number is 1-519-523-9300 from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily.

Monday, August 4, 1980

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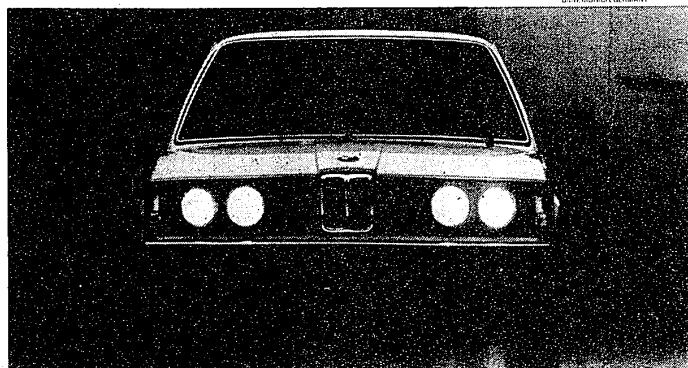
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