

# New season emerges after 100 plays read

STORY: ETHEL SIMMONS  
PHOTOS: DICK KELLEY

Behind every season's schedule at the Birmingham Village Players is a playreading committee.

Last year, committee members each read 60-100 plays before recommending three possible season's schedules for final selection of the 1989-90 season by the board of directors.

Birmingham resident Jim Robertson, who is the new president of Players, headed up the playreading committee for this season's shows.

On Monday afternoon, Robertson detailed the rigors and pleasures of play selection, while on stage member Dick Wagner put final touches on the set as designer for the season's opener, the musical "Something's Afoot."

"I HAVE LOVED that play for two years," Robertson said. "It's a very difficult piece of material. It's extremely complex technically."

He said that "Something's Afoot," which opens at 8:30 p.m. Friday, is a satire of mysteries. "It's the funniest book of a musical I have ever read."

Performances continue at 8:30 p.m. Saturday, 7:30 p.m. Sunday, and 8:30 p.m. Oct. 10-11 at the playhouse on the corner of Chestnut and Hunter. For ticket information call 644-2075, or 642-5016 for season's ticket information.

"Last year, I personally read well over 100 plays. Ninety-six of them I read twice at least," Robertson recalled. He read one play a day for his bedtime reading, and he took notes.

The other six members of his committee individually read a minimum of 60 plays. The playreading committee looks for top quality pieces of material and also judges the plays' difficulty. A show with six different sets, 20 people and four costumes each would be considered a bit too much, for example.

"WE TRY to balance the load on the show production team," Robertson said. In terms of sets and costumes, musicals are most demanding, although plays generally do two musicals a season.

In other criteria, it's important for the club to support its member distribution, with parts for both men and women in a diversity of age groups.



Jim Robertson is backed by stage set for "Something's Afoot" at the playhouse in Birmingham.

The minimum age for players membership is 21. Life members have belonged to players for 25 years. If a play requires children, members' children are used, where possible.

Robertson also stressed the variety of shows from which selections are made. A contemporary play, a classic play, a musical play, a drama, a comedy, a period play, and a mystery or suspense play (or combination of these) make up the choices.

No play is considered if produced by the Players within the last 15 years, or

in general produced locally within the last five years, according to Players guidelines.

IN ITS 58-YEAR history, however, Players has repeated only four shows out of 214 major productions. "The Man Who Came to Dinner," a classic Kaufman and Hart comedy, is the second show of the group's current season. Surprisingly, Players has never done this play before.

Other productions for 1989-91 include "Hedda Gabler," "Rodgers and



Colorful murals painted in 1930s adorn walls of Birmingham Village Players playhouse at Chestnut and Hunter. This mural shows playreading committee at work.

Hart: A Celebration" and "My Three Angels."

Of "Hedda," Robertson said, "We felt it was an extraordinary acting opportunity for a woman. Our group has a large percentage of women, and we have to be responsive to that need."

The Rodgers and Hart production is a musical revue featuring the music and lyrics of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. Robertson laughed appreciatively. "People who do musicals really want to get on the stage and sing," he said.

THE CHOICE of "My Three Angels" fulfills a need to close the season with a strong comedy. The action takes place on Devil's Island in the early 1900s.

"We want to open with a strong piece and close with a strong piece. Some plays are mid-season plays," he said.

Robertson personally believes the end-of-winter March spot should be one where theater groups "put something that makes you walk away happy." He said some groups seem to pick March for a heavy drama that can be especially depressing at that time of year.

In 1978, Robertson was on the Birmingham Village Players playreading

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— Jim Robertson,  
president of Birmingham Village Players

committee for the 1979-80 season. The season presented included "Same Time, Next Year," "Shadow Box," "You Can't Take It With You," "Kiss Me Kate" and "Tartuffe."

This was not the season that had been originally suggested by the committee. "The board only chose two of the five (recommended) to perform," he said.

ROBERTSON APPEARED somewhat agitated, stubbing out a cigarette, as he remembered this experience. "I think the board should take the committee's recommendation as a basis," he said. "It is a very heavy work load, albeit enjoyable."

The playreading committee usually starts its work in late August or early September to come up with a suggested schedule by February-March. The committee solicits the general membership

for ideas, as well as committee members suggesting their own pet shows.

"The basic thing they look for is a play to pique your imagination, that speaks to you," Robertson said. "The committee has good experience in lights, design and direction. It understands the technicalities of production."

Robertson has been a member of Players for six years. He also has been active at the First Theatre Guild of the First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham since the Guild was formed in 1970.

In both groups he has performed, directed and designed productions. Robertson is a former systems analyst by profession.

Gene Ewald heads the current playreading committee, selecting shows for submission to the board for the 1991-92 season.

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