

Theater groups boost amateurs to stardom

By Ann Shaw
special writer

There's gold out there — golden opportunity to entertain or be entertained, to be a part of community theater production.

Community theaters groups for Redford-Livonia, Garden City and Wayne-Westland are opportunities for viewing live performances and showcases for amateur players to display their talents.

And for some of the amateurs, the showcase has turned to a staircase leading to professional and semi-professional performing careers.

Moya Taormina, Howard Egan, Mark Savage and Cathy Mann are some of the people who have started behind local footlights and gone on to other stages, or films or television.

Mary Ann Vosgerchian, Beverly Pemberty, Louise Martin, Gary Andrews, Marlene Duffor, Jennie Garringer and Bill Hoffman are others.

For all the springboard has been theatrical organizations, varied in organization and resources but all firmly committed to offering the best possible entertainment and opportunity.

THE THEATER GUILD of Livonia-Redford (TGLR) has provided the stage experience, training and associations that has led to the greatest number of professional careers.

Founded in 1954 by the Livonia Parks and Recreation Department, the guild incorporated the next year. There were 14 years of using school stages and storing sets, props and costumes in members' basements. Then the group acquired its own building at Beech-Daily south of Five Mile.

More important than location has been the guild's dedication to high standards.

"Our first debt has always been to the audience," said Pat Secor, a founder of the guild and its executive director from 1955-1980.

She explained she learned while getting drama degrees from Northwestern University and the University of Michigan that "if you're really interested in theater, you don't just put on plays you do as you possibly can."

"That commitment leads the guild to careful selection in plays and a strong

effort to offer the current in drama. Last fall Secor and Judy Pierson, her successor as executive director, spent three days in New York checking out five new shows.

THE AREA theater scene also includes the Wayne-Westland Civic Theater, which hasn't missed a performance in 23 years, and the Garden City Civic Theater, begun five years ago.

The Westland group, which recently changed its name to the Spotlighters, was founded by Lois Tobin, John Glenn High School drama department head.

"It's so important to have a viable community theater," said Tobin. "Theater is, after all, how we keep our culture and heritage alive."

The Spotlighters, she said, are constrained by "not having our own building" and boosted "spirit, fun and dedication."

Mike Swain, who began acting in Tobin's John Glenn drama classes and now is Spotlighters president, thinks his group's contribution is "an alternative to media-dominated entertainment," for actors as well as audience.

The Garden City Civic Theater has withstood the difficult first five years largely because of strong support from the school district, said its president, Dr. Mark Barsamian.

"We've had a very good working relationship," he noted. "We have two rooms at the Community Center for auditions, storage and set construction."

"We're certainly an amateur organization," he noted, but added: "We're aggressively expanding, and we welcome new people. You never can tell what untapped talent is out there."

A LOOK at the acting careers that have grown out of this areas community theater can well start with Moya Taormina.

She answered a newspaper ad and wound up playing the lead in the Livonia-Redford Guild's first production, "East Lynn," in 1954.

The next 20 years, she said, included the birth of eight children, and "I played in shows between having babies."

"We always had professional quality directors," she remembers. That meant high standards for productions and also forced the actors to be adaptable, she added.

That training, Taormina believes,



Think of the perfect crime, and you'll find Howard Egan (left), who starred in TGLR's production of "Slouth," and John Powers, who has previously performed with the TGLR.

helped break into a professional career of radio and television commercials. She also learned, from Tom Aquino whom she met during a TGLR production of "The Bells are Ringing," about how to go about making contacts in the professional theater world.

She's been seen and heard on commercials for Marathon Oil, American Motors, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Chrysler and National Bank of Detroit.

Besides its professionalism, this actress has appreciated the Livonia-Redford group's choice of plays. "They haven't been afraid to do daring shows," she said. "That attracts people who want to try out for more challenging shows and keeps an alert, sophisticated audience."

HOWARD EGAN is another guild maintainer who has carved a profes-

sional career in radio and TV advertising and dinner theater.

Currently starring in the Jimmy Launice production of "California Suite," Egan has directed dinner theater presentations of "How the Other Half Lives" and "Slouth." The latter drama he first met when he starred in its TGLR version.

"Good theater is good theater, no matter what level you're in," noted Egan.

"It all starts with fundamentals. The directors and the ladies at the guild built some pretty good habits into me."

Egan also appreciates the guild's "gutsy" play selection and picks "Equus" as one of his two favorite roles with the organization.

The other was "Oliver," in which he Livonia boy who also was destined to go on to bigger things.

Mark Savage followed "Oliver" with a role in Celeste Holm's touring company of "Mame" and his family then moved to California to broaden his acting opportunities. He returned here a few years ago as a Von Trapp son in a

production of "The Sound of Music."

CATHY MANN graduated from Thurston High School in 1961 and from Michigan State University in 1965. That year she also had a role in a guild production of "Ways and Means," and contacts at that time took her to New York and a modeling career.

She returned to Detroit and hosted a talk show on WDIV and now is appearing on NBC's Entertainment this week.

Then there are Beverly Pemberty and Bill Bonds, who starred in a 1955 guild production of "The Tender Trap."

Bonds is now a household face to those who watch television news in this area, and Pemberty has played with Robert Preston in "Nobody Loves an Albatross" and with Myrna Loy in the road company of "Barefoot in the Park."

She has played Pat Randolph on the NBC soap opera "Another World" for 15 years.

LOUISE MARTIN, a career actress who has played many roles in guild productions, is now performing in "To

Grandmother's House We Go" with the Attie Theater.

"I joined because I knew they did quality work," she said. "Anyone can learn the important skills if they are with a good group."

In the last decade Martin has spent considerable time in New York doing theater and radio and television commercials.

But she remains a fan of community theater, especially the Livonia-Redford Guild.

"I would gladly get a waiver from Equity to perform in one of their shows," she said. "This group for many is still an untapped resource. That's too bad, because it's pure gold."

Another TGLR graduate currently at the Attie is Gary Andrews, starring in the Hal Youngblood production of "Dead Ringer." He also has starred in "Zoo Story" at the Attie and "The Subject Was Roses" at Music Hall.

Andrews had tried acting in high school and won the lead in the guild's "Dirty Linen" production two years ago.



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Gary Andrews, who currently stars in Hal Youngblood's production of "Dead Ringer" at the Attie Theater, got his start with the Livonia-Redford Theater Guild production of "Dirty Linen." Pat Secor (left), a founder and first executive director of the Livonia-Redford Theater Guild, and Moya Taormina, who has combined an acting career with raising eight children, are outside the guild's building.

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