Players endures, through good, bad years

By Louise Okrutsky
staff writer

"I GUESS I'M JUST a ham at heart," said Jo Ann Britton, trying to explain the lure of the amateur stage.

This is the 40th consecutive year the Village Players of Birmingham has appealed to the ham in teacherlike Britton as well as engineers, doctors, artists and housewives.

The Players has endured from its beginnings as a private theatrical club with an audience limited to members and guests to its current status as a private club presenting public entertainment. Even during the Depression, members continued to support the club by paying dues.

"People gave up many things. They didn't give up the players," said Dike Dwelley. He and his wife, Dorothy (Dee), have been members for about 40 years.

"SOMETIMES I WONDER how we do it," he said of the group's track record.

In a way, Dwelley's family personifies the group's longevity. His parents were founding members. For a while, his son was a member, also.

Dwelley's too young to have participated in the first season of the group, which was inspired by the suggestion of a Birmingham high-school student, John W. Gafill. But in his early teens, Dwelley climbed around in the rafters of the playhouse as it was being built in 192[illegible].

He's old enough to remember the names of members who are pictured in the mural Fred Farrar painted in the playhouse to decorate it for Valentine's Day 1933. Players' legend has it that he completed the task in one night, "armed with several bottles of booze," according to Dwelley.

The original pastel drawings were painted several years later.

On the east side of the playhouse, Farrar's friend, architect Harry Miehlman, is pictured using an overturned crate for a desk as he designs a set, oblivious to the stage crew working around him. Miehlman was the architect of The Community House in Birmingham, site of the players' first three seasons.

ACROSS THE room, players are pictured being made up for a performance. Edith Bishop admires her rouge while Dwelley's father, George, dressed in Father Time's long white beard and robe, stares out at the audience.

East of the entrance, a committee forever reviews a script. Marge Gafill, sister-in-law of the founder, sits on the table, knees curled under her chin and the remains of a cigarette dangling from her lips.

Such teamwork was responsible for construction of the playhouse and the initial furnishings. Members paid for the building through donations.

Player Howard Simpson provided the material for the playhouse at cost. Construction was provided by Bob Tillotson without profit to his building firm. The curtain, curtain mechanisms and fireplace are donated. Gifts are still the chief source of props and costumes.

Such teamwork keeps the company egalitarian. Last night's star is this afternoon's prop manager.

MEMBERS ARE generous with their professional expertise.

For a recent production of "All My Sons," Dick Wagner, an engineer, used strips of black tape to simulate afternoon shadows on a clapboard house.

"People in the audience were saying, 'How'd they get that house on the stage?'" Britton said.

Louis IV furnishings are faked by interior decorators using old chairs, crumbled masking tape and spray paint.

"You've got to have some dedication," Britton said.

Members are required to attend rehearsals, conducted three times a week and occasionally ending after midnight. The other four nights of the week might be spent in learning lines.

SINCE BRITTON can't always find that amount of time to dedicate to on-stage work, she directs her energies to behind-the-scenes activities.

On the other hand, Dwelley's using his retirement to "indulge this vice" of acting.

"I've been hooked on the theater since junior high school. I've been acting ever since. I acted all through college. A year after college, I joined the players. I've been at it ever since," he said.

"It's a great release from everyday pressures. I can become new characters and enter new situations. It's a never-never land come to life," he said.

For the next 10 weeks, Dwelley will be a Shakespearean actor in "The Fantasticks" at the Botsford Inn in Farmington Hills and a dirty old man in the *Will-O-Way Repertory Theatre* presentation of "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum" in Bloomfield Township.

AFTER THAT run, he plans to try out for the players' production of "The Crucible" later this year.

Although he swears most of the players' performances go smoothly, he enjoys telling about members' triumphs under duress.

His role as Walter Burns, Hildy Johnson's editor in "Front Page," required him to be handcuffed to the reporter. The script calls for his release in time to give Johnson his watch as a wedding present.

But the keys for the handcuffs were lost and the two actors continued the performance locked to each other.

"I thought I was going on the honeymoon with him," Dwelley remembers.

The dilemma almost ruined the ending of the show in which the editor sends the police after his star reporter, claiming, "The son-of-a-bitch stole my watch."

AT THE LAST minute, the keys were found, and the play's ending was left true to the authors' intent.

"I thought we would have to go to the police station to have them sawed off," Dwelly said.

One ill-fated production of "Dial 'M' for Murder" started off with the well-wined-and-dined audience laughing during the scene in which a woman kills an assailant in her home with a pair of scissors.

As the victim died, the audience howled with laughter.

In a later scene, the woman's lover was to smash a window and crawl into the apartment after her husband left. Poor timing had the lover making his appearance seconds after the husband left the stage.

As if that wasn't enough, the stagehands didn't turn out the lights for a scene which should have taken place in the darkened apartment at night. Dwelley, playing the police inspector, burst through the door of the apartment with his flashlight on, only to discover that night hadn't fallen.

IN THE FINAL scene, a murderer is caught by possessing a key to the apartment. He's exposed when he goes

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Peg Telford and Dr. Jack Hassberger appear in a scene from the Birmingham Village Players production of "See My Lawyer," in 1941. Hassberger, a Birmingham pediatrician who is now retired, will be 83 years old in February.

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