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Glorified rummage sale

Cast-offs have historical roots

By Lorraine McClish
staff writer

Members of Farmington Players can be found almost everyday now in their theater barn, weeding out the costume collection to get ready for "A Glorified Rummage Sale," set for Friday and Saturday, Sept. 28-29.

Glorified?
"Yes. Because our rummage has historical roots," said Hope Nahstoll, long-time custodian of the players' costume closet who is sharing the duties of chairing the sale with May Arvo.

"We started collecting when Mrs. William Lancaster, an elocution teacher of the old school, decided she would no longer be able to handle her collection of costumes used for class recitals of her students or for rent at Halloween time.

"Mrs. Lancaster's story is a part of our history, for there are numerous people in Farmington who came to her as youngsters with serious speech impediments whose lives were enormously enriched by her careful, precise speech training. She was still working with some of those students into her late '60s."

When the players bought the Lancaster collection, a space in the barn was assigned to house it. Today, the backstage crew is hard put to work its way through a barely passable aisle lined with marked boxes, shelves and racks filled with memories of past performances.

UP FOR SALE is a variety that runs from flannel nightgowns to straw hats; from period lingerie to uniforms; from parrots to a horsehair hat.

"We're heavy on tuxedos, long dresses and large pieces of fabric that have never been cut for a costume," said Arvo.

"Most of it is rather kooky, ideal for Halloween-costume shoppers, but a surprising amount is useable," she said, pointing to a classic shirtwaist dress.

"Even some of the definite period things might be worn today; handbags, sweaters, coats, costume jewelry."

The players who are doing the weeding of the closet are making what Nahstoll called "some wrenching decisions."

Some of that wrenching comes from just plain nostalgia from a by-gone play, and some comes out of practicality.

"What to let go, what we've just got to keep takes some thought," Nahstoll said. "So often the thing we let go is desperately needed in the very next play and maybe we've stored it for years and never used it. Or we've used it so much it's tattered. But maybe tattered is what will be needed. Even as I speak I've found out we're going to need such a garment for the 'creature' in 'Frankenstein' (the players' fall show) and I'm afraid such a jacket was put into one of the bags for the sale."

THE PLAYERS' first investment in costumes, the Lancaster collection, was intended to be paid for by renting out pieces for Halloween parties. The plan was to rent out just long enough to get their cost back; throw out the Halloween-y things and hang on to the period clothes.

"But the Halloween rentals were profitable and gave us the money to invest in some fine period clothes," Nahstoll said. "We didn't have to give up the idea of doing one certain play because of expensive costuming. If we needed to go out and rent from commercial sources we could do so, or buy new materials to make costumes, and then they became available for rent."

It wasn't long before Farmington Players were known throughout southwest Michigan as the place to go for a costume, for any occasion, or any time of the year.

Church groups, schools, other community players, as well as individuals came knocking, and some of the groups, Nahstoll said, came to depend on Farmington Players' closet to costume their shows.

But the Halloween rentals had to be given up several years ago. We had too many irresponsible strangers to whom the extra deposit wasn't sufficient incentive to return the costume," Nahstoll said.

ALONG THE WAY another factor came into play that added to the well-stocked costume closet.

"Much of our collection has come as gifts from area families who give us period clothes. Many of our patrons appreciate having an agency in the community who will treasure mother's 1926 wedding dress or grandmother's Swedish embroidered trousseau linens brought from Sweden by a young bride-to-be coming to a strange land to marry her fiancé," Nahstoll said.

Also along the way Nahstoll has become a sought-out authority on period clothing. Now it is not unusual that she is called upon to tell what lace would have been used on a 19th century wedding dress, or what handkerchiefs would have been carried by a Victorian maiden.

So it is not unexpected that she should be custodian of two dresses that belonged to Edessa Slocum and her mother, daughter and wife of former Michigan Governor Fred Warner.

Those two gowns, both worn on state occasions, are not up for sale. They have been placed in Nahstoll's care until the Farmington Historical Museum can arrange for them to be placed in a proper display case.

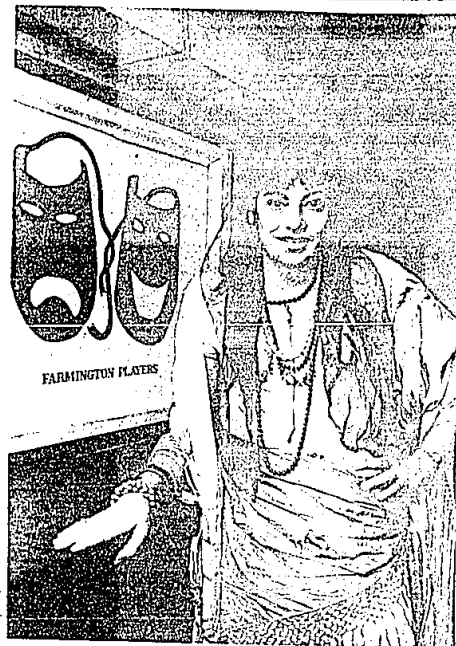
Meanwhile, she is using her expertise in overseeing the what-to-keep-what-to-let-go-decisions leading up to the end-of-September sale.

SALE HOURS for the glorified rummage shoppers are from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. both days in the theater barn at 32332 12 Mile Road. All the merchandise will be displayed in the room that is normally used for the play's rehearsals.

Nahstoll thinks of the merchandise as ideal for the do-it-yourselfer.

"There is every possible kind of material for craft projects, and so many long gowns that have enough good material to do something with if that is combined with a little imagination," she said.

Arvo adds, "There are no (theater) props in this sale. Just clothes. A whole barn-full."



Carol Green, at left and above, showed how easy it was to put together two diverse costumes picking at random from the boxes and bags that have been moved out of the Farmington Players storage closet to be put up for sale. Though the sale is heavy on period clothes, shoppers will find a surprising amount of items suitable for today's use.

Randy Borst/staff photographer

The gown of gray lace over pink satin May Arvo shows at right, popular in the '40s, is typical of the more elegant gowns that will be on one of at least a dozen racks during Farmington Players sale days. Below, Ellie Jorgensen tries on one of a growing collection of hats that will be up for sale. Arvo is chairwoman of the Players' costume closet this season, and co-chairman for the sale working with a committee that will fill the entire theater barn with historical cast-offs for shoppers.



'The First Step'

Y answers area need for extended day care

The A-frame building on the grounds of Farmington YMCA is in the final throes of renovation to prepare to duty for "The First Step," and will be ready to receive its first 24 to 5-year-old clients Oct. 1.

"The First Step" is the Y's answer to the need for extended day care with hours scheduled from 7 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. weekdays.

"The extended day care is somewhat of a spinoff of Prime Time that is operating in five elementary schools now," said Kevin Bush, the Y's executive director. "The before- and after-school care (Prime Time) was researched to make sure this was a service that was needed before we put up the money for that, and we've researched the need for 'The First Step' the same way."

Bush continued by saying that the Y has so many in-house specialists at hand. "The First Step" can offer a unique curriculum.

"We've got ballet teachers, music teachers, tumbling teachers and swimming instructors who specialize in teaching preschoolers so we've got a \$8 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays, 553-6020.

built-in staff for unlimited daily lesson plans," he said.

"The First Step" is the most recent of added services extended by the local Y which Bush called "one of the 10 top success stories among Y's in the country."

Bush BELIEVES the building with some of the extras other Y's don't have, such as an indoor track or whirlpool might account for some of that success, but more than that, the local Y's emphasis on filling needs for community residents.

"Prime Time and First Step would be examples of those needs, or the Mini Citters and Crispy Citters (pre-school development program), or the stepped-up activities we've got under way for the junior high kids, or the expansion of Indian Guides," Bush said.

As in all Y programs, those persons who are members of the Y will get a break on the cost of "The First Step." Inquiries are taken by calling the Y.