

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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CPC

Meadow Brook Theater's artistic director has enjoyed a long stay

By Ethel Simmons
Staff writer

TERENCE KILBURN came to Meadow Brook Theatre in 1969 "just to direct two plays. I never expected to stay."

But shortly after Kilburn arrived, John Fernald left as head of the professional theater company and Kilburn became its artistic director. He has continued to guide the theater, started in 1968, to its coming 19th season on campus at Oakland University near Rochester.

Kilburn has seen the regional theater's season subscription memberships go from 10,000 in 1970, when he took over, to a peak of 16,000 in 1979.

It dropped during the recession that hit the entertainment business hard, but subscribers are on the rise again. "We expect to have this year about 12,500, about 800 more than last year," Kilburn said.

During an interview in his office, downstairs in Matilda Wilson Hall where the theater is housed, Kilburn was surrounded by clutter — all of a special kind — magazines about the theater and books on plays about.

KILBURN, WHO started his career as a child actor in England, will always be remembered for portraying Tiny Tim in one film version of the Charles Dickens classic "A Christmas Carol."

Coincidentally, a musical version of "A Christmas Carol" is one of Meadow Brook Theatre's all-time biggest hits. Kilburn said Agatha Christie and musicals are the most popular productions everywhere. "A Christmas Carol," which has been presented for two consecutive seasons at Meadow Brook, will be presented again this Rochester season. For its third year, consummate actor Booth Colman will star.

As Kilburn answered questions about Meadow Brook Theatre, screams punctuated his comments. This was no mystery, however, the cast is in rehearsal for the season's opener, "Sherlock Holmes," directed by John Ulmer.

"The heroine is being tortured by villains," Kilburn explained with a smile. "This is the classic Sherlock Holmes play that Conan Doyle was involved in writing. We're doing it with a slight tongue-in-cheek."

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WHEN JOHN Fernald established the theater, "It was the John Fernald Company at the Meadow Brook Theatre," Kilburn recalled. "It never was called the Meadow Brook Theatre. John did a marvelous job of getting the theater started."

There was a difference of opinion between Fernald and the university on what direction the theater was to go, Kilburn said, and Fernald decided to leave.

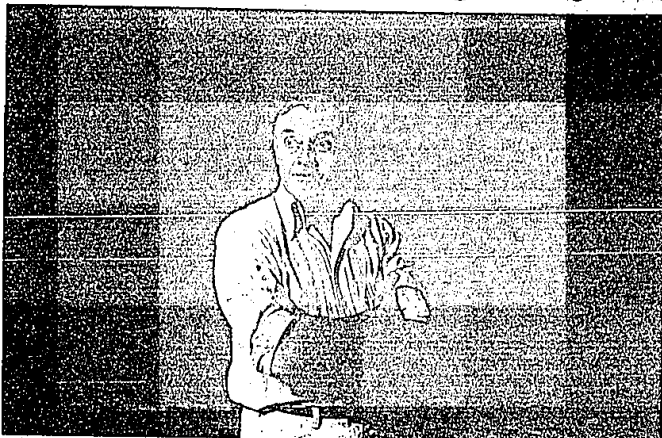
"I was very impressed with what had already been accomplished in 1970," he said. But things were not running all that smoothly. "There was a danger the theater would be closed."

Fernald had come from England's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art to Meadow Brook, and during his tenure there was an emphasis on classic playwrights such as Shakespeare, Chekhov and Ibsen.

"Most people felt it was a bit too heavy," Kilburn said. Now, by contrast, some theatergoers and critics complain that Meadow Brook's season is too light, with too many crowd pleasers, rather than plays that make you think or suffer.

NOT AT ALL perturbed, Kilburn said, "I've never felt too guilty about the fact that we do popular programming. We do a lot of Shakespeare and Shaw. We're not that out of balance."

He said the theater has done "a sprinkling of plays when they were new." These have included "That Championship Season," "When You Come Back, Red Ryder," "On Golden Pond" and last season's "The Dining Room."



DAVID FRANK/staff photographer

Terence Kilburn, Meadow Brook Theatre's artistic director, has been with the professional theater company at Oakland University since 1969. This year is the theater's 19th season.

"What we do have here is an audience that's really enjoying its theater," he said.

People write Kilburn letters. One letter of thanks for good performances came from a couple of Meadow Brook patrons who were leaving the area after 10 years. Others have come from young people who first attended

the theater when they were in junior high school and asked about going into the theater as a career. "I'm pleased that Meadow Brook has that relationship with the audience. I think that's very much what regional theater is about," Kilburn said.

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