



Set designer's woes take wing

By Joan Boram
special writer

Q. What do Meadow Brook Music Festival and a bumblebee have in common?

A. Their wings are too small. Despite conventional wisdom, however, the bumblebee gets around, and the Meadow Brook Music Festival presents Broadway musicals with a full complement of scenery.

Last year's production of "Carousel" came to Meadow Brook from St. Louis' outdoor Municipal Opera ("The Muni"), and the sets had been designed for the Muni's conventional stage.

"There is no fly space to speak of at Meadow Brook," said "Carousel's" director Ed Greenberg in theaterese lingo. "It's only 23 feet from the floor to the beams. The wings (or off-stage area) are practically nonexistent. In St. Louis, we used enormous booms, iron pieces that meet in the center. We put

the drops on a boom, and just roll them out."

It's not that simple at Meadow Brook.

"IT'S VERY TRICKY to use minimal wing space to allow for the cast's access to the stage and to change scenery units," said Greenberg.

In the case of the bumblebee, there's help from a Higher Authority, but mere mortals have to draw on ingenuity and a little help from their friends.

Two-thirds of the sets from the Muni's production worked on the Meadow Brook stage, but the remaining one-third was duplicated in a format specifically designed to accommodate the Rochester stage. For example, the carousel used in St. Louis was an authentic antique, 25-feet in diameter. For Meadow Brook, a new unit was built, using cut-out horses.

"Nobody guessed that it wasn't a real antique," said a prideful Greenberg.

The man who wields the magic hammer is Rick Gopigian, production director and stage manager for Meadow

Brook Music Theater. In simple terms, Gopigian's job is to make sure everything runs smoothly.

"I don't book acts or sign contracts," he said, "but after that it's up to me. With 'Carousel,' they handed me the show, and said 'whatever works, do it.'"

WORKING WITH THE Muni's technical director, Paul Wonske, Gopigian and his crew devised sets on casters that were assembled on stage, behind the scrim curtain. While the cast performed downstage, the numbered sets were assembled back of the scrim, sometimes with only one minute available to complete the assembly.

Gopigian describes the results as "theater magic."

"Rolling those big units on casters, you'd think the audience would hear the casters squeak, but nobody knew what was going on. And when the scrim went up, the audience went 'aaaaah.' It was really rewarding. Gopigian admits he was "astounded" at how well it went. "I

know if I was paying for a ticket and sitting out in front, I'd want a production that runs smoothly. So that's what I try to give them."

The first Meadow Brook theater production was "Oklahoma," in 1984. Set-wise, it was in the "Hey, kids, let's have a show" category, where one bale of hay represented a barnyard, and the audience's imagination provided the full set.

The 1985 presentation, "Chorus Line," was perfect for the facility, because there aren't any sets, unless you count the big mirror in the last scene. Just to guard against complacency, however, the Higher Authority sent a rainstorm that transformed the pavilion in Niagara Falls at matinee time, and to this day, it's the only Meadow Brook performance to be rained out.

THIS YEAR'S PRODUCTION, "Annie," starring Joanne Worley, will

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