

The play is still the thing

THE FIRST TIME actor Ralph Valatka saw the musical "Purlie" he found himself fantasizing about playing the part of Cap'n Cotchipee and being "sung into heaven" after dying "standing up".

Valatka's fantasies are usually far more reachable and practical — like earning a living as an actor, being able to pay the rent and having his own telephone.

As a struggling actor, the founder of the Southfield Repertory Theatre has won some and lost some. Today, indeed, he does have his own telephone and while the struggle isn't over, he's eating regularly and making inroads in his profession.



Shirlee Iden

Amid the ups and downs of trying to forge a career in the theater came the opportunity recently to play — you guessed it — Cap'n Cotchipee. "Purlie" opened last week at the Music Hall Theater. It's quick-paced comedy, songfest, showcases with good voices and superb dancing and tells about a preacher who wants to reopen an abandoned church and lead his people to freedom.

Produced by the Afro-American Studio Theatre, the show's folks of those home-grown, "buy-Detroit" products local folks should support. Valatka does. "I just love doing it," he says. "The Cap'n is a very different character. He's crazy and he's inconsistent, so it was hard to get a handle on him."

VALATKA says the first actor to play the part now plays "Boss Hawk" for the TV comedy "Dukes of Hazard." He wouldn't mind the same success.

Active in every aspect of theater locally for almost two

decades, Valatka first walked onstage at age 10 as part of a boys' choir chosen to back up the Metropolitan Opera at the Masonic Temple.

"I can still remember how overwhelming the smell of that audience was," he says. "The blending of furs, fabrics, perfumes and people hit me strongly. It was electric."

In founding the Repertory Theatre, he acted, produced, directed, sang and schlepped with his company, of course holding down a paying job so he could at least have the dimes to use somebody's telephone.

But the theater bit the dust when state aid through the Michigan Council of the Arts was curtailed in 1980-81.

VALATKA pulled Gonzo Theatre out of his theatrical bag of tricks, producing and acting in the four-person spoof which found a home at Stouffer's Northland Inn for a time. "We still resurrect 'Gonzo' for private parties who want a musical spoof," he says.

"The resurrection's necessary because 'Gonzo Theatre' died the day they padlocked Stouffer's Northland Inn without notice last year.

You can't keep a good actor down, however, and Valatka's plugged along, with credits for a dozen or more television commercials.

"When they look beyond the pretty faces and get to actors, I get my turn," he says.

"My goal is still to keep on working, to earn a living as an actor." Sounds simple, doesn't it?

"Purlie" continues for two weeks, longer if there's demand. And he continues to have a lot of fun doing it. When the curtain goes up, Valatka's backstage watching, as dazzled by the lights and action as ever.

"I just have to stand there and watch for a few minutes. It's super."

Our No. 1 game is changed

WITHOUT MUCH FANFARE or bluster the grand old game of baseball that was invented by Abner Doubleday in the last century has undergone another great change.

Sitting at home the other evening and watching the Tigers drop another game in 12 innings, The Stroller thought about it.

For almost three hours, he sat and watched. In all that time, he didn't see one outfielder use two hands to gather in a well-hit ball. Instead, they just stuck up their gloved hand and pulled in the sphere.

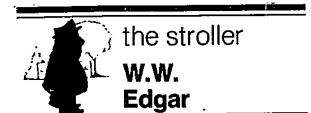
In the "old" days an outfielder who continued to try the use of one hand would not have remained in the lineup very long.

As he kept watching, The Stroller realized that the big change has come with the equipment, including gloves that are two and three times the size of those used when the Tigers were winning pennants.

TODAY'S GLOVES were brought into the game to improve the defense and give outfielders a chance to counteract the long ball hitters. But it sure looks peculiar to see an outfielder just hold up his glove and let the ball, no matter how hard hit, nestle into it.

The Stroller well remembers when Hank Greenberg, the Tiger first baseman in the '30s, attempted to use a larger-than-ordinary glove. It was quickly outlawed. Now, even the pitchers wear the big mitt.

This is the second great change in the game that The Stroller has seen. He has no trouble recalling the days when the baseball itself was changed to carry further.



the stroller
W.W. Edgar

And with this came the home-run age to supplant the old-time pitcher battles when a hurler needed only a few runs to register a victory.

When he was "covering" the Tigers, The Stroller asked Hans Lobert, former third baseman of the Philadelphia Phillies, what the difference was between the game he played and the game that was played in the '30s.

"SIX INCHES on the handle of the bat," he answered, and then pointed out that in his day the hitters tried to place hits. They left the bat stick out about six inches from the grip.

"Make that a rule now," he said, "and you would see a different game. Now the batters take a long hold and swing from the their hips."

But the change that surprised The Stroller the most was the use of these modern leather baskets by the outfielders. As he looked on in amazement, he couldn't help feeling that the modern baseball game is just another version of basketball — only this time when the ball goes into the basket you lose.

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comment

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Primary fever is upon us

It is a season of discontent

THIS IS THE season that strains politicians' sensibilities.

There are only two weeks left before the primary election. In many cases the primary election will determine who will win office in November.

After weeks, months, and even years, of planning, plotting and campaigning to win a particular office, a day of decision is nearing.

The intense pressure of early-morning-until-far-in-the-night campaigns and the constant struggle to put on a good front, to say the right thing, to get the right people behind them, to outwit the opponent has taken its toll.



Bob Wisler

In most cases the candidates are worn, frazzled, testy, belligerent, bellicose, nervous or nauseous.

The latest poll results have thrown some camps into a tizzy. While many campaigners are proceeding on a deliberate course, there is a quality of desperation now to many of the campaigns.

All candidates vow in the beginning not to let things get out of hand. In the end, many succumb to the pressure.

In Madison Heights last week Oakland County Commissioner James Doyan, D-Madison Heights, went to court to sue his opponent, Stephen Miller, claiming among other things that Miller and his supporters harassed Doyan's 72-year-old mother. The suit alleges that the guilty parties phoned Doyan's mother, rang her doorbell, threw trash on her property and "implied" threats of violence to her son.

THERE ARE also charges by both sides of campaign signs being destroyed and confrontations involving shouting and lapel-grabbing at campaign functions.

In the race for the Republican nomination for governor, Gentleman Jim Brickley accuses opponents of "gutter politics." Headlee's TV ads, the Brickley camp charges, are filled with "inaccuracies, innuendos and distortions." Brickley's campaign manager told the Brooks Patterson manager, "Your campaign's vicious personal attacks on both the lieutenant governor and Mr. Headlee can do nothing but hurt the ticket and all Republicans who will be running in the fall."

Headlee, or maybe his PR man, Bill McMaster, says

Brickley is the "ever-clever politician who shifts and drifts with the polls."

WE ARE being deluged now with political statements. The League of Women Voters, newspapers and others are providing voters with statements from all candidates, not just the major ones. After reading some of these statements, we wonder why most candidates even bother to run.

It'll have to admit there are some novel approaches, however.

Betty Mason, the only candidate for the Democratic nomination in the 12th Oakland County Commission District that sooner or later Oakland residents can stop worrying about overcrowding at the Oakland Jail. Demographics, she said, will take care of the problem.

"It makes no sense to build more jails when the population is getting older and the age group which has the highest crime rate gets older," she said. "There is not a high incidence of seniors committing crime." That's good news.

The candidates for Wayne County executive were asked to name the three most important changes each would make in county government. One answered thusly:

"Structurally, no changes other than those stipulated by the charter are planned initially. Fiscally and financially, all expenditures over a certain dollar amount would require prior approval. All functions within county government would be impacted/alterd by this procedure."

I say, does this candidate have the makings of a politician, or did he go to the Irwin Corey School of Double-talk?

Another county executive candidate, Helen Gotowka, listed the top need as "clean streets" to be financed (presumably) by "a county lottery to keep money in the county."

Another candidate, asked to specifically list which budget items could be cut and which would be protected said, "If elected, I will review every department budget to ensure cost effectiveness and need. The need of the people . . . will influence my decision to eliminate, cut back or expand any department program."

This man, only 21 now, should go far in the field.

Bear with us a while longer, readers, the Aug. 10 primary will take some of the edge off.

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