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'Miss First Nighter' goes into 18th year at Fisher

By Ethel Simmons
staff writer

IT WAS 18 YEARS ago when Valerie Hilsen of Bloomfield Hills first approached Jon Essex, spokesman for Detroit's Fisher Theatre, and asked him if she could do some interviews with the stars appearing there.

Essex listened to a few tapes of her interviews with other performers around town, gave the go-ahead (with the approval of the Nederlanders, who own the theater) and Hilsen has been "Miss First Nighter" at the Fisher ever since.

Through the years, Hilsen also has become a "first nighter" conducting interviews with show-business personalities at other Detroit-area theaters operated by the Nederlanders family.

At the Fisher, she usually goes backstage during intermission to talk with the stars. Through arrangement with the Birmingham Theatre, entertainers appearing there call her on the air during one of the two radio shows she presents Thursdays on Livonia-based station WCAR-AM (1090).

HILSEN ALSO may be found at the Nederlanders' Pine Knob Music Theatre in Clarkston, talking with the rock stars who headline concerts at the open-air pavilion.

Most of Hilsen's interviews are done on tape, for broadcast on her radio shows. One interview can go a long way. She runs snippets during individual shows, and listeners can hear from the stars on many occasions.

A onetime child performer, who studied with Jesse Bonstelle at Detroit's Bonstelle Playhouse, Hilsen grew up to become a wife and mother of three children. She began a career in interior design and then started writing advertising copy for clients.

She was looking for a way to enhance her professional life when she followed the advice of a client who suggested she go into radio.

Hilsen's voice has a sweetness and

warmth that has helped bring her close to her listening audience. The interviews of those early years, which relied more heavily on flattery of the stars, are still positive but solidly factual.

BEFORE THE FISHER went dark for the summer, Hilsen conducted interviews backstage with stars of the Paddy Players production of "Jesus Christ Superstar."

On that night, she did her interviewing in the green room after the show, where the surroundings were a madhouse of activity. She skillfully and entertainingly carried on an informative conversation with the stars who played Jesus and Judas, as well as with the show's producers.

Interviewing stars as "Miss First Nighter" is a real plum that many media personalities would like to have. So how did Hilsen get the OK? Recently, Jon Essex recalled what he liked about Hilsen's early tapes. He said she didn't interrogate the celebrities. Her interviews had a conversational quality that would be pleasing to the stars and radio audience alike.

"I don't like to put a person in a bad light," Hilsen said, explaining part of the approach that has kept her going strong for 18 years. "Frank Judge (ex-newspaper columnist) said, 'Never get into controversy — people are going to tire of you.'"

Hilsen's two radio shows are both broadcast Thursdays. She also arranges and delivers her own ads, on the air, between the interviews she conducts and the records she plays. Advertisers like Thursdays because it puts people in mind of the weekend activity, she said.

HILSEN CALLS many of the people she interviews "Valerie's American Royalty." It never fails to impress notables, to find out they are being considered "royalty" and has helped Hilsen get some interviews that might otherwise be tough to obtain.

Telephone calls from listeners are an important part of the radio show, and

Hilsen estimates that she gets 50-100 calls during each show.

She not only interviews entertainers but also individuals prominent in the business world and other endeavors. Recalling the first interview she ever did, Hilsen said, "I was 12 years old, and Mae West was appearing in town as Catherine the Great. I made up a story that I was doing an interview for the school paper. She was exactly the same offstage as on."

One of the most unusual interview situations occurred when she went backstage at the Fisher to interview platinum-blond musical star Carol Channing. "I went in the dressing room and said, 'Where is she?' It turns out, I was talking to her. I didn't recognize her. She wears a wig onstage. Her hair is as dark as mine."

WHEN HILSEN went to interview the late Maurice Chevalier, a theatrical giant, she was 45 minutes late, and he told her she said, "Goodbye," then he asked her to stay, and they talked at length.

"It was the last interview he did before he died," she said, "and somehow I lost the tape. It's the only interview I've ever lost."

Hilsen admits she is not organized. But she can accomplish a lot on the spur of the moment. "If you'd ask me to plan a cocktail party for 150 tonight, you'd have it," she said.

To get an interview with Sammy Davis Jr., Hilsen had to wait two years, but it was worth it. She had requested an interview when he was at Pine Knob. Although he wasn't available then, he remembered the request, and two years later when he was back in town, his manager called to set up the interview.

Even Sammy was impressed when she called him "one of the greatest entertainers of our time," to lead off the interview, she recalls.

"IF YOU COMPLIMENT someone, it works miracles," Hilsen said. She talked to the multi-talented entertainer

for one and a half hours and has been using bits of the interview ever since.

"I tape one-half to an hour with the big stars, and I will play five to seven minutes of it on a show. It's timeless," she said. "I try to get things on it so that three years later it sounds like yesterday."

Among her favorite interviews has been Barbara Streisand. "She loves antiques. She likes unusual clothes. She doesn't put on an act. If she likes you, she likes you," Hilsen said.

Other stars she particularly enjoyed range from the late Agnes Moorehead and the late Edward Everett Horton to young David Cassidy.

Hilsen has used a few offbeat techniques to get the attention of the stars. At a press conference for Bob Hope, she sat in the front row and purposely didn't ask any questions.

"FINALLY, HE SAID, 'Why aren't you asking me anything?' and I talked about seven to eight minutes with him."

One of the interviews Hilsen flubbed was with Henry Ford II. She had tried to arrange an interview, and unexpectedly he called her without advance notice, asking, "What did you want to talk to me about?" She was so taken aback, she didn't know what to ask and the interview floundered.

Besides being "Miss First Nighter" and a radio show hostess, Hilsen is busy with all kinds of projects, some active, many others still in the planning stage. She is involved in a company that distributes hair care products and cosmetics. She is putting together a musical revue, hopefully to premiere onstage at the Fisher, and she is thinking of opening a health spa in Michigan.

A local gossip columnist once asked Jon Essex, "Is Valerie really going to produce a musical?" and, according to Hilsen, Essex replied firmly, "Everything she says she's going to do, Valerie plans to do."

Hilsen is a large-sized woman, and

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Young David Cassidy, who starred recently at the Fisher as "Little Johnny Jones," is one of the hundreds of celebrities Valerie has interviewed.



Margaret Hamilton, shown being interviewed by Valerie, is perhaps best known as the wicked witch in the movie "The Wizard of Oz."



Distinguished performers Valerie has talked with include Douglas Fairbanks Jr.

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