

Entertainment



Ethel Simmons

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Movin' Theatre on road again

By Cathie Breidenbach
special writer

IMAGINE THE BEST toe-tapping dance tunes from 70 years of Broadway's hit musicals in one show.

Wayne State University's traveling dance troupe called Movin' Theatre celebrates song and dance in its new touring show, "Decades of Broadway Dance."

Bill Wilson of Troy, who is getting his master's degree in directing, coordinates bookings and productions for the company. He says there's quite a bit of singing in the current, high-energy, narrated production. "Decades" brings together a lineup of the shows that have hit Broadway marquee theaters and broken house records since the 1920s.

Highlights include the Charleston from the '20s jitterbug from the '40s, a hand-jive number from "Grease" from the '50s and a tap routine from "42nd Street," plus show-stoppers from "Singin' in the Rain," "Peter Pan," "A Chorus Line," "Grease," "Applause," "Gypsy," "West Side Story," "Cats" and "Sweet Charity."

EVERY TUESDAY for the next 14 weeks, Movin' Theatre will take to the road to perform at assemblies and workshops at schools, community centers and senior citizen complexes in Southeastern Michigan. Occasionally the Detroit troupe has danced as far from its Wayne State home base as Canada or Ohio.

When Movin' Theatre performs at the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts or at the Detroit Institute of Arts Youththeatre, busloads of students from 30-35 schools come to see the fast-paced show. In recent years, the troupe performed at the Fine Foods Festival at Detroit's Hart Plaza and on TV's "Good Afternoon Detroit." It christened a fountain at the Detroit Institute of Arts by dancing in the water.

Nira Pullin, artistic director and choreographer for Movin' Theatre, founded the company in 1977. As a member of Wayne State's theater faculty, she "wanted more opportunities for dancers. I saw so much talent."

Most years the university Theatre Department presents one musical and a Christmas show with dancing. "I realized that performers needed more training and performing opportunities in dance," Pullin says, so she started the all-student troupe.

Movin' Theatre's shows in previous years traced the history of dance

through the ages — beginning with Medieval dances of knights and ladies and stepping delicately through the lace-cuff refinement of the Baroque era, to the swirling grace of waltzes into the emphatic beat of '80s music.

WHEN THE TROUPE put on a workshop, schools sometimes specified interest in a particular era. In addition to teaching a dance and etiquette from the time, the troupe brought costumes and dressed someone in the clothing of the period. Workshops accommodate up to 50 students who may learn the Charleston, the frug or how to do a simple tap routine.

The WSU theater program aims to familiarize students with a sampling of dances, clothing and etiquette from many eras to prepare them for the varied roles they may play in their acting careers.

Pullin explains, "We're not a traditional dance company because we're part of the Theatre Department." Plays are set in all eras so, "We do all phases of dance — all time eras."

When plump Victoria reigned in England, ladies wore long, full crinolines and flirted with fans. Modern actresses trying out for plays set in Victorian times must move and sit gracefully in voluminous ankle-length petticoats and learn to affect the correct, demure "availability" with a fluttering fan.

Actors studying Victorian times learn how to bow correctly and how to take snuff as Victorian gentlemen did. Every era has its dances, its protocol and its lighting styles. Wayne's Theatre Movement classes include fight choreography, which sometimes means fencing.

AN ACTOR who couldn't wield a sword with daring grace wouldn't stand a chance in auditions for Cyrano or Mercutio. Fight choreography and fencing demonstrations remain all-time favorites with student auditions, Pullin says. "They love the active ones best."

Kate Kenney, a troupe member from Rochester, says audiences so far this year "like the upbeat songs best." Her personal favorite is the tap number from "42nd Street" because, "It's fun to make the music with your feet." She says she joined the company to learn to pick up dances easily. "I've learned all different styles of dances, so when I go to an audition and they want a tap dance, I have one and can whip it

out, or if they want a Bob Fosse style dance, I know one."

Back in 1977, when Pullin started Movin' Theatre, she realized, "There was a market, because I kept getting calls." The enthusiastic market for dance holds steady year after year, and after a season off, the troupe is booked this year for nearly all regular Tuesday shows as well as for some workshops and special events including a performance for the university's Hillberry Theatre.

"But we do have some time left," Pullin says. The group is in such demand that, "If I could take students out of school, I could book them full time." Students, however, juggle other Bonstelle classes and outside work schedules with the troupe's bookings. Members receive performing credit for their labor of love but no pay.

The current company is composed mostly of students majoring in theater. Besides Kenney, it includes another Observer & Eccentric area resident, Michael Serapiglia of Troy. Other troupe members are David Figlioli of Sterling Heights, Annessa Kortez of St. Clair Shores, Allen McCoy of Okemos, Scott Peerbolte of Highland, Jennifer Potocki of Warren, Robin L. Urban of Dearborn, Brent Vance of Detroit and Tracy Washburn of Romeo.

MEMBERS AUDITIONED last spring to be part of the troupe. Last fall they worked up the show and ended the semester with a few shake-down performances. During the current winter semester, the troupe performs every Tuesday, often combining a morning show with a movement and dance workshop in the afternoon.

Movin' Theatre charges \$500 for a 45-minute show and \$100-\$150 for a one-hour workshop. Proceeds from performances don't completely cover expenses, however. Pullin says, "People don't realize how much it costs to mount a show."

Transportation, costumes, sets, musical tapes and promotions add up. "One pair of jazz shoes costs \$45. We just hope to break even," she says. This year the troupe received a grant from the Dayton Hudson Co. to help defray expenses.

Bill Wilson coordinates the multiple details of taking the show on the road, which includes arranging transportation for the troupe, the set and costumes. The set must be trans-



Movin' Theatre dance troupe members are Scott Peerbolte (top row, left) and Troy resident Michael Serapiglia; Brent Vance (third row, from left) Allen McCoy and David Figlioli;

Rochester resident Kate Kenney (second row, from left) and Robin L. Urban; and Jennifer Potocki (bottom row, from left), Tracy Washburn and Annessa Kortez.

ported to the site and assembled and struck for every show.

Richard L. Anderson designed 20 lightweight, aluminum parts that make a three-part Broadway marquee to frame the performing area. The side panels act as curtains for entrances and exits and dressing rooms for the quick-change cos-

tumes designed by Paula Trimpey.

Kate Kenney describes the basic costumes as leotards in coordinated, mismatched colors worn with leotards. Costume changes for each dance often entail "just adding on little things to set the time of the dance." For '50s, the women wear

poodle skirts and sweaters. Kitten ears and mitten paws transform the troupe into felines for the "Cats" number. Uncomplicated costumes and a lightweight, easily assembled set are a necessity for a "road show" that brings Broadway's best dances to a different school or community organization every week.

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