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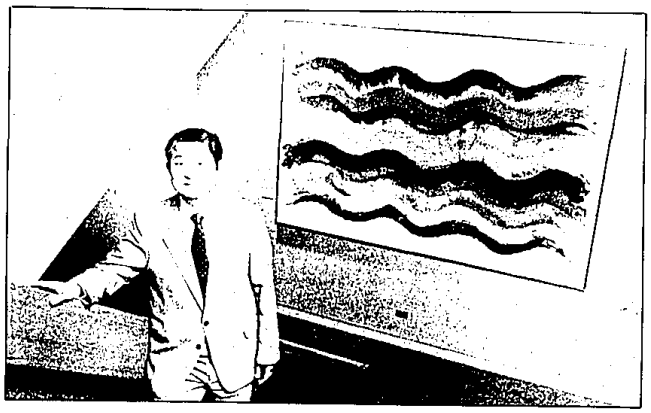
Celebrating 25 years

Good leadership keeps gallery theater strong



JIM RIDER/staff photographer

Kiichi Usui pauses on the steps in the Oakland University library with a work of art by Pat Lipsky behind him. Placing fine art around the university is another activity that he finds satisfying.

Usui postpones own art

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

OAKLAND UNIVERSITY'S Meadow Brook Art Gallery is a one-man show. Tokyo-born curator Kiichi Usui researches the themes, arranges the exhibits, accounts for the gallery's collection and works with the Meadow Brook Gallery Associates.

He has done this for 25 years.

"It was luck," Usui said.

He was in black tie for the opening of a Meadow Brook Theatre production and his attire wasn't out of place in the well stocked quarters of the gallery's humidity controlled storage room.

"I think the reason I have had so much cooperation from the university is because I was the first one here and the university was so young. I am lucky to have had the community support and have met so many good friends."

Usui's first one-man show was in 1964 as a painter. It was so successful he was asked to join the university art department in 1966 to teach and head up the art gallery. In 1971, he became the full-time curator.

"There is no other gallery like this," he said, citing his advantageous location across the hall from Meadow Brook Theatre.

WITH A budget of $150,000, Usui mounts four shows a year drawing 32,000 people, an attendance surpassed only by the Detroit Institute of Arts. Usui has the greatest public exposure per dollar value anywhere.

Of course, inherent is a responsibility to the theater goers who visit the gallery before the curtain goes up and during the first intermission.

With thousands of children attending the holiday production, "A Christmas Carol," Usui is mounting "Toys Created by Artists," a collection of holiday toys created by Michigan artists.

He will follow up with "Protest," a survey of art created by impulse against political oppression, and "Contemporary Art from Israel," co-sponsored by the American Israel Education Institute.

Piled next to him is a foot-high stack of catalogs, written by experts in each field, representing his shows (including his bi-cultural Japanese art show from Kobe, Japan, "Through Closed Doors").

Usui is quick to cite his favorite "Found Industrial Objects: Unintended Art." Against a backdrop of tar paper on the wall of the gallery, he created designs using dashboards, oil cans, even tire marks.

"Art is in eye and head, rather than in hand. You find beauty in your eye," Usui said.

Usui will open the gallery next fall with a show "Retrospective Art of the 80s," drawing heavily on the Richard Brown Baker Collection in New York.

"Baker is rare. He has an excellent eye for locating young unknown artists and collecting them before they became famous," Usui said. "He was buying Warhols and Pollocks in the '50s."

USUI SETTLED in New York in 1955 working as painter, meeting collectors such as Baker. After his marriage to Betty Tono and the arrival of their daughter, Eriko Eleanor, he needed full-time employment, so he accepted the Oakland University position. He has a sister and mother in Japan.

"When I retire from being curator, I will sell my paintings," he said. "I can't mix the two, promote my own art while exhibiting and promoting other painters. I have a few more years before retirement."

His OU position gives Usui the freedom he enjoys.

"That is the reason I left Japan. The society there is very rigid. When I left, my teacher's theory was that where art is flourishing, the nation is going uphill. I was going to France, but my teacher said France was declining. New York would be the new center of the art world."

Usui's proudest achievement at Oakland University has been the Meadow Brook Gallery Associates, a group of supporters, formed with the help of Florence and S. Brooks Barron.

"Like they say, 'town and gown'," Usui said. "Generally, the local community and the academic world do not support each other. I have support from both. I think this is rare."

THROUGH THAT support, Usui acquired 300 African pieces, a gift from G. Mennen Williams; 300 contemporary prints and paintings, gifts from other donors, many of which are placed in offices throughout the university.

He is especially pleased with the display of Chinese hanging scroll paintings at the Kresge Library. He also mentions his 1981 outdoor sculpture competition featuring six sculptures by Michigan artists now on the Meadow Brook Music Festival grounds.

"Art must be exposed to the people," he said. "It is no good if kept and stored. I am pleased when the people complain when we retrieve a piece from the university offices for a show. Yes, I have done something right."

Usui has a secretary and five students who help him. "I tell the students to find a job doing what they love. I am lucky to have a job I have never gotten tired of."

Kilburn marks 2 decades

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

HIS HAIR is turning white, but his eyes looking out over his wire glasses are bright and lively.

Sixty-five-year-old Terence Kilburn has the same Tiny Tim look as he did 52 years ago in the film, "A Christmas Carol." Now in his 20th season as artistic director of Meadow Brook Theatre in Rochester Hills, which is celebrating its 25th season, Kilburn's life has come full circle.

"That was the reason I was hesitant to do 'Christmas Carol' — for personal reasons," he said. "I thought everyone would say I was capitalizing on my success in the movie. I decided to hold off until we had a recession."

NEVER IN his wildest dreams did he believe that the show would be the success it has become. Now, after eight years, it is a tradition. The set is the only one stored and used each season.

Ticket requests for the show start as early as May. Ninety-five percent of the 45 performances are sold out each holiday season. It is the company's biggest success.

Kilburn's popular productions of "Summer and Smoke" and "Ah, Wilderness!" won him the job of artistic director of the theater in 1970, when it was in debt for $700,000 when John Fernald resigned.

"I was thrilled to have a theater and glad to work on a budget. I guess it was my English parents who gave me my practical sense. I have a budget and I work within it."

ENGLISH-BORN, Kilburn (who became a naturalized American citizen in 1956 when he was starring on Broadway in "Teahouse of the August Moon") had personal reasons for wanting to settle in the Rochester area.

He had been living in London when his mother had a stroke in 1969. Oakland University offered him a permanent living arrangement where he could take care of his mother and work in his career field.

"I was in my early 40s and this theater had the basic things — the props, the scenery and costumes," said Kilburn, whose only trace of an accent is in his use of the long "O" sound in the word "process."

TODAY, THE 608-seat Meadow Brook Theatre operates in the black with a budget of $2.6 million. Eighty percent of the budget comes from ticket sales, with the remaining 20 percent from corporate and private gifts.

Subscription base this season is up 5 percent over last year to nearly 11,000. In 1980, it was 15,000.

"That was really too high," Kilburn said. "It was like a club. Nobody else could get a ticket to the shows. We have studied our ticket sales and they shadow the automobile sales exactly."

KILBURN HAS been criticized for not being more adventuresome in his selection of plays, he said. Last year, he decided to mount four premieres and a mystery (to balance the budget). Critically and artistically, it was one of the best seasons ever, but the non-profit regional theater lost 1,300 subscribers.

"As I see it, we have two goals — to maintain artistic goals as high as possible. Secondly, we can't shake our heads and say we only care about artistic quality, we have to pay attention to what our subscribers want. I guess growing up in the movies has made me more practical."

For this season, he decided on musicals to start and end the season, a mystery, a Shakespearean fantasy, a comedy, and the play for which he won the London Critics Award, "Inherit the Wind."

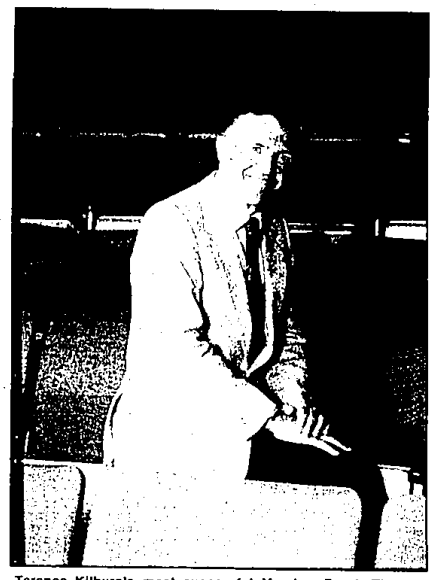
"For 'Cabaret,' we had something we have not seen recently — lining up at the box office. That means more people are living closer to the university and will stop over to buy single tickets."

THE SUCCESS of each play depends mostly upon the casting. Last summer for "Cabaret," Kilburn was in New York for only four days to do the auditions and callbacks. He also auditions in Chicago, Minnesota and California.

"The trick is to imagine how Mr. X in New York will work with Miss Y in Minnesota. Rehearsals are a time when the actors are free to experiment and try new things. What I don't want is a stage full of robots."

Most striking is the longevity of the production and administrative staff members. Turnover is low and rare. Loyalty is high, employees said.

Managing director Jim Spittle has been with the company since 1979, having gone to plays at Meadow Brook as a high school student. He gave an unsolicited opinion: "Terry Kilburn is the finest man I have ever known."



Terence Kilburn's most successful Meadow Brook Theatre production in terms of box office is "A Christmas Carol." He starred in the film, which was made 52 years ago, as Tiny Tim.

'I was thrilled to have a theater and glad to work on a budget. I guess it was my English parents who gave me my practical sense. I have a budget and I work within it.'

— Terence Kilburn, artistic director

Museum classes a winner; remember Perrinsville

Bob Sklar

A HOLIDAY horn of plenty:

• Its classroom record is a clear signal that people like to learn when the material at hand pricks their interest.

During the 1989-90 school year, nearly 6,000 visitors took part in social history classes at the Plymouth Historical Museum.

Some were college students studying local history. Others were seniors re-living their childhood. Many were youngsters anticipating dinosaur bones.

The main curriculum: how 19th-century villagers lived, worked and played. A testament to the classes' popularity, reservations already are coming for next year.

Boasting Grandma's Attic, Great-Grandma's Trunk, Victorian rooms, the Schroeter Indian Art Collection, Main Street and the Then and Now Center, the museum truly is a historical treasure trove, particularly for kids.

"I think it's probably the most important thing we do here really," museum director Beth Stewart told Observer reporter Julie Brown. "The best place to start is if you can get children when they're young."

Right on, Beth!

Kids learn about the same things — American Indians, pioneer families, Victorian times, local history — in school.

But museum education program coordinator Betty Childs and her able staff have a knack for making the past come alive through use of authentic artifacts — stone tools, old-time toys, arrowheads, period clothing.

"We can really show them what they read about in a book," Childs, Plymouth Historical Society education chairwoman, told the Observer.

I know of few local programs as wholesomely enriching as this labor of love for Childs and her fellow volunteers who teach classes at the Plymouth Historical Museum.

• It's called Perrinsville.

In its heyday about 1850, the village flourished as a small commercial center at Ann Arbor Trail and Merriman Road.

"It was a stagecoach stop between Detroit and Ann Arbor," said Joe Benyo, legislative assistant to the Westland City Council.

Today, Perrinsville is a quiet neighborhood with few reminders of its historic past.

The coming of the railroad farther south, to what is now the city of Wayne, spurred its decline in the late 19th century.

What once boasted Abraham and Isaac Perrin's successful sawmill on the Middle Rouge in the 1830s reverted to farmland.

The four corners became part of the new city of Westland in 1966.

The one-room Perrinsville School, the former general store and a few streets, including Perrin, are now the only remnants of Perrinsville, relates a Michigan historic marker.

A big fan of saving pioneering educational signposts, I'm delighted Westland has applied for a $50,000 state equity grant to help restore the 134-year-old Perrinsville School, the first brick schoolhouse in what was then Nankin Township.

Western Wayne County students would attend day-long classes in the restored school. Harper Readers and reproductions of early textbooks would highlight the 1890s curriculum.

• Super sleuth Jim Dermody of the Farmington Hills Historical Commission has prepared a fascinating mini history of the workers camp that once stood southeast of 12 Mile and Halsted. The camp's lake and dam are still visible from Howard Road.

The non-profit camp for adults and kids operated from 1932-36 through a lease agreement with the Workers Educational Association, a socialist labor group. A Communist Party presidential candidate visited the camp in 1932.

A special grand jury probe revealed that two major fires at the camp, in 1933 and 1935, proved the handiwork of the notorious Black Legion, a Ku Klux Klan spinoff.

The black-robed members characterized themselves as "Constitution loving, Communist hating, white American protestants." Violence, including arson and bombings in Oakland County, was their hallmark.

Fortunately, the racist movement collapsed after 16 leaders were indicted and convicted of murder and other crimes in Detroit in 1936.

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