

## *Reminiscing the Decades*

(Tom Rhodes, *Never Too Late* playbill 2007-2008)

### **A Tender Look at Where We've Been in the Past 49 Years**

(Until the Vero Beach Theatre Guild came into being in 1958, the only arts organization in town was the Vero Beach Art Club, which was already 22 years old. Then the Guild came along that year, and was eagerly welcomed by a culture-starved community. What was it like to present a play in the 1960s? What was it like in the 1970s to perform in the beautiful new theatre by the river? The move to San Juan Avenue in the '80s? We've invited people from the past 49 years of Guild life to tell it like it was as they lived it, decade by decade. The 1960s were covered by Tom Rhodes in the season opening playbill; our second historian was Mary Ellen Replogle, writing about the period 1971-80. Peter and Barbara Peck reminisce now about the 1980s.)

Gene Davis, our director in the 1960s, used to tell amateurs trying out for plays that there were no small parts, only small actors. History shows we took his injunction to heart. In the first decade of the Guild, it took a lot of fun-loving, dedicated people willing to take small parts to put a show on the boards. No small actors allowed.

The first Guild play I saw was *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, performed during the third season in 1961 at the old high school. I had no idea what it took to produce this delightful comedy, but I soon found out. Sets were built and lines rehearsed in whatever empty garage could be found. I think it was Joan Pickel who ran the costume department, and the rest of us pitched in with whatever needed to be done.

Names? You never can remember everyone, but there were regulars you couldn't forget: Gordon and Sally Popple; Jim Cinque and Bill Turner from WTTB; Eddie Trent who always had his lines memorized by the first rehearsal; Elsie MacMillan, Howie Tunley; Tony Stocks from Piper; Rich and Marti Bireley; Steve Stahl, our director after Gene Davis; Dale Knisely, John Avril, the lovely Diana Latta. Just a few of many. Forgive me, the other hundred or so I left out.

We hit the big time in 1965. We had taken *Inherit the Wind* to a regional conference in Daytona, packing our sets in a truck and assembling them overnight on a stage half the size they were built to fit. The critics weren't too impressed with our acting, but were more than impressed by our 2,000-plus membership.

Things were going well for the Guild. The community was fully supportive. Thoughts of building a new theatre started percolating when the city of Vero Beach offered beautiful riverside park land to any not-for-profit group, with the understanding that a building would be constructed there within a year. Our first step toward a theatre was to be a \$28,000 structure used for rehearsals, costume storage, set building, meetings and social events. By this time, an angel, not from heaven but from St Louis, had arrived in town. Carroll Otto, a retired insurance executive, and his wife, Dorothy, loved the theatre and took us to heart. We had secured pledges of \$1,000 from 28 individuals to pay for construction, but the bank wanted collateral which Carroll provided, allowing the loan to go through. The building was built and still stands as part of the backstage at Riverside Theatre. We were still building sets that had to be trucked to the high school for set-up and performance. Sometimes the stage was needed for daytime activity and we had to strike the set after the show and then set it back up for the next night's performance. It was worth it. Our musical in 1965, *The Sound of Music*, was a smash hit. We even filled the house for dress rehearsal.

Financially, the Guild was up and running, and the next step would be the construction of the new theatre, finally accomplished for the 1973-74 season. ■

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(Mary Ellen Replogle, *Oliver!* playbill 2007-2008)

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The 1970s were exciting years. The Guild was going to move out of the high school and onto its own stage. In 1971, in the city's newly established Riverside Park, ground was broken for a community theatre. It took five fundraisers (the last one headed by Dan Richardson) and \$850,000, but in the fall of 1973 the Theatre Guild's production of *Tom Jones* opened on the new stage.

A year later, Steve Stahl was hired as managing director and remained in that capacity for the next 10 years. With a permanent stage now available, set design and building became serious matters. Under the guidance of Guild volunteers Tom Rhodes and Rich Bireley, productions acquired a professional look and Marti Bireley added an artist's touch to the scene. They were later joined by Steve Housely and Read Johnson. Read's expertise in lighting was a great enhancement to the shows.

During this period, Stage II was developed to attract volunteers. It was a program of backstage workshops that included every phase of theatre from acting to set design and construction, makeup and costumes. Stage II was an offshoot of Jim Cinque's earlier summer workshops held at the Community Center.

Volunteers, then and now, were the backbone of productions. The 1974 playbill noted that it took 135 volunteers (workers and actors) to produce *Play It Again, Sam*.

Onstage, new names began appearing. Ken Zinck, Nancy Bryant, Marty Wright, Jim Mitts and Bette Parfet, director par excellent. In the last year of the decade, Betty Abbott made her Guild debut in *6RMS RIV VU*. It was her fine professional photography, however, that enhanced Guild publicity for the next 20 years.

This was the decade of friendly media. Phil Long of the Miami Herald and Dell Lockwood of the Vero Beach Press Journal covered Guild events with a blanket of publicity. Pat Hazel at WTTB comped us many minutes of airtime to publicize productions. Bill Lochrie began editing Stage Whispers, an in-house newsheet for Guild members which continues today. Gordon Popple, one of the Guild's original members, created Popple's People. This was a mini-variety show with a dual purpose: entertaining clubs and civic organizations while it publicized the Theatre Guild.

It wasn't all work in those days. The Guild loved to party and Alice Kleine was chairman of the good times. She arranged opening night champagne parties and backstage open houses to welcome newcomers. In 1978, members celebrated their 20<sup>th</sup> year of operation with a cocktail party onstage. The biggest social event was the Genie Awards Night held at the end of the season in a beachside hotel. It was, and still is, a joyous occasion.

By 1980, Guild shows were considered the best live entertainment in town! ■

## *Reminiscing the Decades*

(Peter and Barbara Peck, *Enchanted April* playbill 2007-2008)

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The Vero Beach Theatre Guild had moved into Riverside Theatre in 1973. It was then known as Vero Beach Community Theatre and was operated by the Vero Beach Community Theatre Trust. Guild volunteers did most of the physical work to add much-needed improvements, such as costume storage space, building divider walls for offices, adding to sound and lighting, etc.

The '80s decade was a time of change – a change in management. Dear, hard-working Steve Stahl was a big loss to us when the Trust board did not renew his contract in 1984. The same Trust board had hired Allen Cornell a couple of years before as set designer for the Guild. Fay Humphrey, Donna Roberts and Gerre Rhodes, plus the ladies in the box office, rounded out the list of paid employees at Riverside Theatre.

The Guild had agreed to come under the “Theatre Family” with all funds handled through the Trust accounting system and bank account.

The Theatre Trust controlled all decisions concerning the spending of monies earned by the Guild, earned by the Trust (theatre rentals, booking showings of professional road shows, etc.), and any donations and funds raised by The Friends of Riverside Theatre, the theatre's fundraising arm. The Guild could no longer make the final selections of shows to be performed by us, or who would direct them.

Hmmm, can't choose *what* we do, *how* it will be done, and can't have the *profits* earned from all the work? Those were the conditions if we stayed in Riverside. Decision made – we find another home.

There were two possible buildings available in Vero: (1) the Florida Theatre downtown on 14<sup>th</sup> Avenue, a good location with stage and theatre seating, still owned by the movie company, which had an inflated idea about its value, and (2) the former Central Assembly of God Church on San Juan Avenue, a block north of the Indian River County Administration Building, less expensive but with lots of work needed to convert it into a live theatre. Decision made.

We had lots of willing volunteers who could hammer and paint, but first – to have a theatre in an established residential area like McAnsh Park, we had to get a variance. Guilders canvassed the area residents with petitions to sign in favor of our being on San Juan Avenue. The residents supported us, and the city granted the variance.

Pastor Buddy Tipton, his congregation and the bank worked out financing solutions we could handle with the funds we had. Also several Guild stalwarts signed papers guaranteeing the loan.

On the last weekend of June 1985, we moved tools, costumes, props, office furniture and machines, set pieces, risers, ladders and 15 years of Guild scrap-books into our new 300-seat theatre. Truck after truck, carload after carload crossed the Barber Bridge, heading west to our new home, taking with us wonderful memories, leaving behind the grand piano we had no place to store.

### **A hot summer on San Juan**

We were once more an all-volunteer theatre. It was a busy summer. New workers and supporters appeared, including former professionals in many fields, volunteering their skills and learning new ones. Betty Abbott helped with the many fundraising events we dreamed up, from Oktoberfests to auctions to walkathons and band concerts.

Pat Hazen was president that year, and worked hard to keep things upbeat and energetic. She, Read Johnson, the Gibson brothers – Graham, Randy, Jay – Mike Gerbhardt, Tony Stocks and Tony Morley led the brigade converting the chancel into a stage equipped with necessary sound and lights. The pews would be kept as seating until we could afford to replace them. A curtain would also have to wait, too expensive for the current budget.

Bette Parfet and Barbara Stocks guided the ladies in sorting and storing costumes in organized spaces. Bill Herman was overseeing makeup and wigs, and their proper storage and accessibility in the dressing rooms. It takes a lot of work offstage to get an actor ready to appear onstage!

Enough of our season ticket holders – not all, but enough – retained their memberships and gave donations to

guarantee necessary building renovations. Others predicted we'd be out of business in a year. The donations and memberships were now recorded and monies banked in our own bank account by the efficient ladies in the office – Pat Kett, Helen Garraway, Marthamae Schlow, Betty Mayo, Molly Zeuch and Natalie Drew – under the tutelage of Barbara Peck, who had learned about box offices at Riverside. Pop Seeley took over finances.

Win Levi headed the committee to sell and design ads for the playbill. His working years had been in advertising and he was a godsend as well as his wife, Joyce, who wrote all the editorial material for a playbill which was a cut above the usual community theatre program.

### **We begin again**

Some 16,000 hours of volunteer labor were counted that summer as we built a new theatre. We finally received our certificate of occupancy literally hours before the Guild opened its new season in December 1985 with *John Loves Mary*, a deliberate choice from the slate of its very first season.

For a while, there were no doors backstage, so entrances were made from the lobby, through dimmed house lighting, up the side stairs and behind the sets. Actors remained there until the act was over, then reversed the process. Later doors were built to allow stage access from outside the building – performers using umbrellas when it rained. But everyone was smiling. The Guild was thriving and audiences were pleased.

From the beginning, newspaper critics were enthusiastic about our San Juan shows (*see page 67*). One commented: “The Guild has transformed an old church building into a warm, clean, friendly theatre. It's obvious that the afterglow of encouraging fellowships still lives there.”

The 1980s was a decade of change and triumph and we were very happy to be a part of it. ■

## *Reminiscing the Decades* (Sarah Morley, *Hello Dolly!* playbill 2007-2008)

### **A Tender Look at Where We've Been in the Past 49 Years**

*(Until the Vero Beach Theatre Guild came into being in 1958, the only arts organization in town was the Vero Beach Art Club, which was already 22 years old. Then the Guild came along that year, and was eagerly welcomed by a culture-starved community. Plays were performed at the naval base, junior high school and high school, sets built in garages and costumes stored in private homes until the city offered park land by the river on which to build our own theatre. What were the early days like? The move to San Juan Avenue in the '80s? We've invited people from the past 49 years of Guild life to tell it like it was as they lived it, decade by decade. The 1960s were covered by Tom Rhodes in the season opening playbill; our second historian was Mary Ellen Replogle, writing about the period 1971-80. Peter and Barbara Peck covered the 1980s, and now Sarah Morley, long-time casting chair and a Guild performer since 19xx, will tell you about the 1990s.)*

The '90s were a time of change, both physically and financially, for the Vero Beach Theatre Guild. We had taken a big risk moving into the church on San Juan Avenue in 1985, not knowing if we could raise enough money to renovate it the way we dreamed. We took the risk that we wouldn't lose season ticket holders, that people wouldn't mind sitting in pews to watch our plays, that actors wouldn't mind having to run around the outside of the building to make entrances and exits onto the stage - no matter what the weather! But our fears were unfounded, because people still came to try out for our plays, and the citizens of Indian River County still supported us with their presence and their donations. Our community theatre fit comfortably into the old church, but the reality was we needed new seats, we needed to slant the auditorium floor and we also needed to turn our stage around and place it at the opposite end of the building!

#### **The miracle on San Juan**

It seemed as if only a miracle could make this happen, and it did! Our volunteers leapt into action, holding fundraising events and working around the clock to prepare the building for renovations designed by local architect John Dean. We received our first major foundation grant and a state grant, both helping in a big way. We couldn't use the theatre while the renovation was taking place so in 1992 we held summer and fall shows at the Center for the Arts and Heritage Center. During the blistering heat of that summer, and in the midst of construction dust and noise, the box office operated stalwartly out of the greenroom. We showed off our transformed building for the 1993-94 seasons, very proud of all we had accomplished. That year we also implemented the new Shoestring plays (low-budget, produced "on a shoestring"), and hired our first production coordinator. We also presented performances interpreted by the American Sign Language system for the hearing impaired. During the '90s we supported young playwrights by presenting two world premieres, *317 Sullivan Street* and *The Sugar Bean Sisters*.

On the financial front, the Wahlstrom Foundation funded an upgrade to our lighting system; the Gannet Foundation replaced 10-year-old spotlights; and several generous bequests enabled us to lower our mortgage. Our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary season ended with greater income from ticket sales, more financial contributions and more playbill advertising support than ever before.

The '90s had proved that the Vero Beach Theatre Guild – with the help of its many volunteers and patrons – could move into the new millennium better equipped to bring the best community theatre possible to the vastly expanding population of Indian River County. It truly was the miracle on San Juan Avenue. ■

## *Reminiscing the Decades*

(Carole Strauss, *Barefoot in the Park* playbill 2007-2008)

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The new millennium began a decade of Review (where we've been, what we've been doing), Re-commitment (who we are, where we're going), and Re-tooling (updating our facility, equipment, and technology).

The decade began with an analysis of attendance for the previous 10 years, which highlighted the kinds of shows our audience preferred and the timing of those shows. An audience survey confirmed these findings and, as a result, the board of directors initiated several changes. Play selection took on even greater emphasis and was more closely monitored, an additional Sunday matinee was added to the second week, the Wednesday evening performance was changed to an earlier 7 p.m. curtain, and the June show was moved into May to better accommodate our seasonal and season ticket patrons. In addition, in response to actor complaints, the double show on the second Saturday was changed to a matinee only.

The working principle at the Guild centered on the audience as our customers and our guests, and on our commitment to making their comfort and enjoyment a priority. The board also recommitted to our volunteers, the lifeblood of the Guild, and to maintaining an enjoyable and rewarding environment. So –

The board initiated a tech week for all shows and training requirements for all technical volunteers. We had lighting and sound workshops, acting and directing workshops and, for the first time, hired a full-time production manager for our all-volunteer organization. The Guild installed a new lighting system, new sound system, new air conditioners and refurbished the roof.

Then –

In 2004, two hurricanes hit. Air conditioning equipment was ripped off the roof, leaving major holes and lots of water. Fortunately loyal volunteers were on site and worked hard to save the set and seats, but we still had to drop one of the season shows, leaving the Guild with a four-show season, lots of expense and reduced revenues. But –

Repairs were made (new air conditioners, new sound board, new roof...) and the 2005-06 season and the 2006-07 season got us back on track. Also, the Guild's traveling troupe of singers and performers, Guild on the Go, began once again to entertain throughout the county.

This past summer, in preparation for our 50th year, lots of additional updates were implemented – our ticketing has been computerized; our restrooms have new vanities, mirrors, window treatments and more; our lobby, hall and auditorium entrance have new flooring; and the ticket office has a functional front window for ticket sales so the lobby will not be as crowded before each show.

Last, but certainly not least, new, talented, wonderful volunteers continue to join the Guild family. Without our committed volunteers, we could not do what we do and, without our loyal audience, we would have no reason to do it. This decade will continue to Review, Recommit and Re-tool. We all look forward to the Guild's next 50 years. ■