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Celebrating 50 years of stellar shows from Wagner College Theatre

by Judge PHILIP STRANIERE

It's hard to believe that 2018 marks the 50th Anniversary of the Wagner College Theatre Department.

For a half-century, this nationally recognized program has provided countless hours of enjoyment for Staten Islanders and has been the training ground for many performers "trudging the boards" successfully at theaters all over the U.S.

To celebrate this milestone, there will be several events involving the theater department open to the public including a fund-raising gala May 14 at 6 p.m. on campus.

This event will include a performance by some alums. If you have photos or memorabilia, or want to attend contact Felicia Ruff, Department Chair, at Main Hall.

My memories are from before the department began, when I was president of the student-run theater organization, the "Varsity Players," later rechristened the "Wagner Players."

For years the Varsity Players presented plays directed by Wagner professors such as John Hruby, Al Wagner, Dennis McDonald and Jack Boies.

My first encounter with the Varsity Players was in 1958 when my brother, Robert, joined the group as a freshman.

The all-volunteer Varsity Players presented four straight plays each academic year. Students were expected to build the sets, hang lights and, if not in the production, work crew or front of the house. It was there I learned to keep the theatre cold; it helps the audience stay awake.

My first show in 1965 was Thornton Wilder's, "The Skin of Our Teeth." I had a minor role. It provided one of those memorable moments that makes live theater so great: The log placed in the fireplace by Marianne Loffredo decided to roll out of the fireplace and into the audience. Marianne quickly adjusted saying, "That happens every night."

Another classic moment occurred during a production of "Luther" in February 1968. This was presented by the Chapel Players, also a student led group, which did religious themed productions. I played Pope Leo, a role that enabled me to verify the truth of W.C. Fields' observation, "Never appear on stage with kids or animals."

My big, and only, scene was at the Pope's hunting lodge. It included Al Wagner's white German Shepherd, "Max," and a falcon owned by another faculty member.

My first line was "Double-faced German bastard."

Unfortunately, as I delivered the line, Max decided to stand on his hind legs and lick my face. This helped convince me that comedy was my forte and not serious drama.

Fields was again proven correct at the closing performance when Max realized the falcon was also on the stage and decided to chase the bird, much to the chagrin of the students handling both animals. It looked like a scene from a Marx Brothers movie.

A memorable production was “A Man for All Season,” in March 1967. The film star, John Carradine, was cast as Sir Thomas More. I believe it was the first time Wagner had a professional actor work with students in a play. I was cast as Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury. The cast featured students, faculty, and administrators.

Although the current Wagner program is centered around musicals, a check of the Varsity Players’ production history lists almost none. During my four years, the only musical we mounted was Lerner & Lowe’s “Brigadoon” in May 1968.

It gave me the opportunity to wear a kilt.

The reason for this failure to present musicals was that most of the students with great voices were in the choir. Rumor has it that the choir directors told the students they could not do both theatre and choir. Considering the choir went on a tour each year, it became an easy choice.

The program for Chekhov’s, “The Three Sister,” lists Stan Jay of Mandolin Brothers fame, as one of the wandering musicians, and John Richard Basehart, nephew of actor Richard Basehart, as a faculty member.

I believe the quality of the Varsity Players’ productions, and the commitment of the students and faculty, helped convince the College to establish a theatre major.

Lowell Matson was hired to create the Theater Department with a new major.

Unfortunately, as non-majors, Matson decided not to cast any of us in his productions. The department’s first production was “Green Grow the Lilacs,” in November 1968. Theater trivia buffs know this as the play on which Rodgers & Hammerstein’s “Oklahoma!” is based.

Although cast with students, Curley was played by a guest artist, Ted LaPlatt.

The first musical for the new department, in the spring of 1969, was “Stop the World, I Want to Get Off,” a small-cast show. The creation of the department gave Matson the opportunity to recruit students looking at theater as a vocation and not just an avocation.

In retrospect, had there been a theater major back in those days, I might not have become a lawyer and a judge. I might have had a career as Woody Allen’s or Richard Dreyfuss’ stand-in. My theatrical experience did help me become a better public speaker, to learn to adjust to unexpected situations, and create a unique writing style for my judicial decisions.