



“My uncle’s got a barn. Let’s put on a play!”

Resident thespians find their niche in Sun City theater group

By Phyllis Moses

Remember these lines from the Andy Hardy movie series? What fun it was to watch Andy Rooney and Judy Garland persuade their friends to do something exciting to entertain friends and neighbors in their town.

That’s the way it happened in Sun City, in 1996. Almost.

Danny McCoy, Sun City’s Executive Director at the time, suggested the residents form a theatre club. His friend, Don Shook, who directed a theatre group in Dallas, came to Sun City for a meeting. Fifteen aspiring actors met in the ballroom for an all-day conference to talk about how to put on a play. Out of those who attended, there are only five still in the club. Their name, the Sun City Theatre Club, recently officially became, the “Actors and Theatre Arts Guild.”

Few of these had ever trod the boards of a performance stage. Only a few even knew basic theatre jargon. Nevertheless, they had the idea, the inspiration and lots of encouragement; that’s all they needed.

The Peril on the Pecos

On a hot August night in 1996, this band of thespians produced their first play, a melodrama titled “The Peril on the Pecos,” or “Gunfight on the Gory Gulch.” Don, the Director from Dallas, came down to help. It was a resounding success. Sun City resident, Harold Steadman, who played the lead role, subsequently became the first President of the Club.

Among those first members were Fred Verri, retired IBM executive, and Morgan Fogelman, retired from real estate. Her only acting experience was in high school.

Fred tells of a humorous incident that happened in the first production, “Perils of the Pecos.” As he recalls, “It was a melodrama. Harold Steadman played the unscrupulous villain, Philadelphia Phoster, and I played Nocheese, the chicken-hearted Indian Chief, Phoster’s accomplice. In the play, he and I agree to sit down together to smoke a peace

pipe, which was tucked in my costume. If I put a little powder in it and blew in it, it would make a puff of powder to simulate smoke. As we sat down, I said, ‘We need to smoke the peace pipe.’ Earlier, when I came on the stage, we had a little tussle; the peace pipe came out and fell off the edge of the stage. When it became apparent the pipe was missing, I didn’t know what to say. Now remember, this is my first time on stage; that’s when my hair started turning grey, right then and there.” I looked over the stage, and there in the front row were some kids. I saw the peace pipe on the floor, so I said, ‘Nocheese needs peace pipe.’ So a little kid gets up, picks up the pipe and hands it to me. No one knew that it wasn’t a scripted part of the play, yet I was sweating bullets at that point. That’s just one of the many moments we have to ad lib or improvise for the play to continue. Most of the time the audience never knows it.”

The profit from *Pecos* ticket sales became seed money to buy essentials, which included their sound board and professional stage lighting. They were off and running.

We’ve come a long way

Fred and Morgan tell many humorous stories about those first few plays. Fred recalls, “In the beginning, we were a bona fide boot-strap organization. When set decorations were needed, we scrounged around to find them. We begged and borrowed furniture; we scrapped many of our pieces together.”

Morgan said, “The growth of the club has enabled us to add capital improvements to the ballroom and to obtain equipment necessary to function as a theatre. At one time, we gave scholarships to local high schools and Southwestern University to benefit struggling actors.

“Our productions are important to the community; we provide entertainment ‘on site,’ which is essential to people in Sun City.”

Morgan continued, “We’ve come a long way: from using folding chairs and card

tables to our present inventory of props. Our productions are professional; we now have stage lighting and music. In fact, the group adopted the motto: “We’ll Act Up for you!” as their mantra.

That ain’t no lady

Jim Hastings, current president of the organization, became involved when he moved to Sun City. After emptying all the packing boxes, he looked around for something to do. There was a call for auditions in the *Sun Rays* for a new play. Thinking this might be interesting to investigate, he responded. There were veteran members of the club there, including the director, who was conducting the auditions.

“I was invited to sit down and she handed me a script. They came to a role whose name I didn’t recognize. No one raised their hand to read this part, so I did. The director, M. J. Hunter, said, “Jim, that’s a female role.” I spoke up in a falsetto voice and said, “I can do that.” They all had a big laugh. Then someone said, “Maybe you’ve got a point there. It might work to cast a male to do a female part.” When Jim went back the next day, they had decided not to do the character that way; however, he was cast in another part for that play.

Ron Chalmers, the group’s Artistic Director, says, “My background with the theatre group is much like Jim’s. One day I noticed an ad for auditions, and decided to go and see what the group was all about. My former experience in entertaining was singing and playing the guitar.” He recalls, “The lady who was conducting the auditions, Morgan Fogelman, handed me a script. One minute later, I’m auditioning for a part; eventually I got the role in ‘Mary, Mary.’”

Needed - Sense of Humor

Frequently, humor runs unbridled during the production of a play. Even when everything has been worked out beforehand, props in place and lines memorized. Anything can happen, and often does.

Ron tells of a funny experience that happened in the play, "Mary, Mary." As he recalls, "A lot of the action takes place around my desk, for which we had bought a proper desk chair from a local store. It had served well on the previous nights. This was closing night. One of the actors, Don Shelby, had a scene where he was sitting in my desk chair. On cue, he went to sit down, suddenly the base of the chair cracked in half. Don was almost thrown to the floor. He saved himself from falling, and without missing a beat he asked, 'Where did you buy this chair – Goodwill?' That got the biggest laugh of the entire play."

These are the mishaps that make the play work; moments of tension and pressure. They are heart-stopping, nail-biting, adrenaline-rushing moments. Maybe that's what keeps the actors coming back to the next auditions.

Dedication, time and talent

Members of the theatre group love what they are doing. They are dedicated volunteers who give large hunks of their resources, including their personal time and talent in order to fulfill the commitment to bring first class entertainment to the residents of Sun City. Total dedication is critical to bring about the best possible outcome, for when that curtain comes down; they all want the curtain calls and ovations.

It takes a village to put on a play

It takes many people in addition to the actors to put on a play. There are stage hands, lighting people, those who do costumes and makeup, those who build sets, and many other jobs. There's something for everyone. "It's all volunteer work," Ron Chalmers said, "One of the agreements you have to make when you sign on board for a show is to see it through to the end...aside from some crisis that forces you to withdraw."

Jim Hastings described the process of costuming, "We have a costume committee. The head of the committee is Penny Wendleken; she refers to herself as the 'Costume Queen.' She loves her job, and is always on the lookout for new costumes. In fact, she is making a black cape for Geoff's character in our next play. The only difference between our group and Broadway is the location."

Geoffrey Martin and his wife, Terri, have been in Sun City less than two years. A retired computer consultant, he is the Advertising and Publicity Director of the club. He writes news releases for local print and broadcast media.

"Last spring when we joined the group, we decided to try out for various roles, which included 'The Solid Gold Cadillac.'

"Our productions are important to the community; we provide entertainment 'on site,' which is essential to people in Sun City."

- Morgan Fogelman

Terri not only acted in the play, but created production posters and covers as well. Her talents include dancing and other artistic gifts." Geoff continued, "That's one of many positive characteristics of this group, we have lots of fun. We laugh a lot."

Geoff also sells ads for the programs that are printed for the plays. Revenue from these ads pays for the programs with a small amount left over. The ads are inexpensive for the exposure they receive.

Reader's Theater

Geoff explained different ways they produce plays. "We meet twice a month," he said, "on the first and third Mondays. On the first Monday we have our business meeting. Immediately following that, a group of us go across the street to the Activities Center and meet in one of the meeting rooms as "Reader's Theatre," a sub-group of the club that presents productions that are read, script in hand, rather than memorized. This offers performance opportunities to those who are unsure of their ability or don't want to put in time to memorize lines. The format for a performance can range from sitting on stools, reading from scripts, to performing on stage with some degree of acting, costuming and staging."

Experience from all over

"We have a lot of grand dreams." Jim Hastings said. "It's changing because we're getting a huge influx of new people with lots of talent. They're moving here from all over the country, from the West Coast to the East Coast, and in between."

"We had people in our last production of The Follies who were in vaudeville; they made their living as performers. One of them, Bill Connerly, was in burlesque. A trumpet player, Bud Emmert, who played with the Dorsey brothers and Lawrence Welk, is in our group. He also appeared with Red Skelton in the 40s."

Artistic Direction

One benefit of a theatre club is that as membership expands, the pool of talent gets larger. However, that's not the

only result they are enjoying from growth. It also offers more artistic opportunities presented in the styles of acting and production. Ron recognizes the significance of steering the club's artistic direction. He heads up a committee of bright, analytical personalities capable of facing challenges head-on and making decisions that will, unquestionably, shape the future of the club.

Plays are scheduled through 2008. One of the responsibilities of the committee is to read plays and decide which ones to schedule for the coming theatre year. "We're working now on the 2009 schedule; if we're clever enough, we might even lay the base for 2010," Ron says. "We read a lot of plays from those we already own in our library or those we order from outside sources. Our major focus is to broaden the mix of plays we present. We don't want to limit ourselves to light comedies which have been our mainstay in the past, but we would like to include dramas with more serious themes as well as some musical presentations."

Developing the craft of theater

"We're beginning to look at ourselves as something larger than just a small club with a group of people who like to put on plays. We're developing a craft of theatre here, and starting to think of ourselves as something more than a bunch of amateurs. We're offering some pretty decent productions as a result," Ron said.

The players are originals; they are joyous in the imaginative vein that suits the theatre's unique genius. From the first 'Curtain Up' until the director says, "Strike the set," the actors are in character. There is a sense of passion and pride in every performance.

They don't claim Shakespearean acting skills. It's enough for them to have a venue where they can experience the thrill of acting.

In Hamlet, Macbeth gazed out the window and asked "To be or not to be? That is the question." Did he learn the answer? Maybe not, but one thing is for sure, the players in the Actors and Theatre Arts Guild in Sun City know they have come a long way since that first play in 1996.

