

## TCP History 1932 - 1990s

The Twin City Theater Guild, a community theater group first incorporated in 1932, found itself unable to get rights for plays because of a misunderstanding over royalties. To get around this problem, the organization disbanded and reformed as The Twin City Players (TCP) on August 23, 1934. Articles of Incorporation give the address of TCP as the YWCA in St. Joseph. The purpose of TCP was to advance the interest in legitimate theater and its kindred arts by the exchange of social relations of its members and presentation of better examples of dramatic art. The By Laws called for TCP to be managed by a board of 11 directors elected annually. Personal property was listed as stage settings, scenery, costumes, lights, general theater equipment and cash, with a total value of \$1,000. Income would come from member dues, contributions, and sale of tickets for productions.

No records exist until mid 1938, except for a copy of a playbill for three one-act plays presented in April 1935. Minutes of board and membership meetings survive for mid 1938 through mid 1946 and reflect member interest in regular social activities that often-included performance of one-act plays. They also show a constant struggle to collect membership dues and find:

- Good plays to perform.
- Organizations to sponsor them.
- Places in which to perform, and
- A permanent home for the company

### **The Search for a Permanent Home**

August 1939 minutes, for the first time, refer to a "club house" on Lake Blvd. It was named the Lighthouse Workshop. In December 1940 minutes there is reference to new meeting rooms in the 505 Building in St. Joseph. However, the "grand opening" for these new quarters didn't come along until December 1942. It was celebrated with the performance of two one-act plays at the new studio. By the mid 1940s, this space, always problematic, had become unacceptable and the organization again was looking for a home to call its own.

### **Trouping for the Troops and Others**

Throughout the war years, TCP entertained troops, bought war bonds and put on plays sponsored by organizations such as the Army Mothers, Navy Mothers, Coast Guard Reserve and Civil Air Patrol. At that time, TCP often had sponsors for its plays who kept profits from the production over and above expenses and an agreed-upon fee for TCP. Kiwanis and Elks Clubs were frequent sponsors.

### **A Move to Benton Harbor**

It was in 1946 that the group rented the second floor at 185 Pipestone in Benton Harbor. It was a large space with enough room for props and scenery storage, set construction and rehearsals. The tall ceilings easily accommodated the 12-foot flats. Not so easy was moving set pieces down the narrow, steep stairs to the Benton Harbor High School for the performances. The Benton Harbor studio was home for Players until 1951, when they were notified that their tenancy was being terminated "by order of the fire department." Over the next couple of years, the group would rent temporary spaces in downtown St. Joseph.

### **Children Part of the Program**

Beginning with the 1947-48 season until 1953-54, the record again is silent as to the business of the organization. However, copies of programs remain which suggest an active community theater. Several plays were produced each year, one of which usually was for children. Records show 1830 tickets sold for *Jack and the Bean Stalk*, which brought in \$1,241 and netted a profit of \$656. It played at the Benton Harbor High School on January 12, 1946.

### **Twin City Players in the 1950s**

The TCP archive contains what appears to be a complete set of programs from the 1950s. Typically, a season consisted of four Main Stage productions presented at the Benton Harbor High School Auditorium over a single weekend. Tickets were sold through a season subscription with very few sold individually at the door. Business records for the decade are incomplete, but the meeting minutes that exist speak to challenges that sound familiar even today. It was difficult to recruit directors. It sometimes took weeks to assemble a cast, and occasionally it couldn't be done at all. A November 1952 issue of the *Curtain Call* informed members that *The Story of Mary Surratt* had been canceled because it required 30 men and three sets. *Joan of Lorraine* was selected instead "as it requires only 17 men and no set to speak of."

Then as now, revenue from program ads placed by local businesses was important to successful operation of the business. Records show \$1,450 in ad revenue for the 1954-55 season. The names of some of those early advertisers still are familiar: The News-Palladium and The Herald Press, later to become the Herald-Palladium, and the Larry Bell Insurance Agency Inc., later, Bell-Molhoek. WHFB AM/FM, Win Schuler's, and Troost Brothers Furniture. Many others, like the St. Joseph Division of Whirlpool-Seeger Corporation, the Brass Rail and Marine Bar, Producer's Creamery,

Rohrings, Theisen-Clemens, and Heath Company, have long since slipped into local history.

Besides the plays it produced, TCP benefited the community in other ways. Periodically, TCP donated proceeds from one of its performances to a local charity or the "community giving" campaign. Records show the United Cerebral Palsy Association of Berrien County received \$159 from a performance of *Come Back Little Sheba* in early 1954.

The organization struggled to build membership and sell season passes and program ads. Then, as now, TCP looked for better ways to maintain mailing lists, collect dues and get people to show up for scheduled clean-up days. And always there was the ongoing effort to find or create the right kind of home for the organization.

Minutes from August 4, 1953, confirm the purchase of two lots on U.S. 12. Plans proceeded immediately for construction of a Butler building on the lots, which cost \$6,741. This "Studio" on Lake Shore Drive provided much needed space for meeting and rehearsing and for storage of props, set materials and costumes. Almost as soon as it was finished, however, leaders began seriously looking at expansion plans and/or relocation options that would also provide performing space. Purchase of the Caldwell Theater in St. Joseph was considered but abandoned as too expensive. A consultant, asked to come up with a remodeling plan for the existing Butler building, clearly was appalled at the disparity between TCP's dream of having a theater of its own and the organization's ability to finance such a venture.

### **Twin City Players in the 1960s**

For the first time, Twin City Players had a home of its own. Known as "the Studio," it was the hub of TCP activity, the place where meetings (and parties) were held, sets constructed, and rehearsals conducted. It wasn't until opening week that everything and everyone moved out of the Studio for final dress rehearsals and the performances. In 1960-61, productions were moved from Benton Harbor to the Junior High School in St. Joseph. After a couple of seasons there, they were transferred to the new St. Joseph High School, where they remained for the rest of the decade.

In the 1960s, TCP membership varied from season to season, but usually ran between 40 and 60 individuals. Each member agreed not only to pay dues but also

to sell season subscriptions (and sometimes program advertising) and work on at least two major productions. Miss three successive meetings and they were out. Careful records were kept making sure everyone held up his or her part of the bargain. Looked at from 30 years, it doesn't seem surprising that TCP found building membership a constant challenge.

In 1962, the board began looking outside the area for directors to help improve the quality of TCP productions. A director from New York City was brought in for the 1963 production of *The King and I*. It was a smash hit and ushered in an era of big, successful musicals, including *Guys and Dolls*, *The Sound of Music*, *Finian's Rainbow*, and *My Fair Lady*. Over 200 people turned up at auditions for *Music Man*. All these musicals drew well over 2,000 patrons; *Oliver* topped the list at 2,840 over five performances.

In fact, the resident director of the 1963-64 season was credited with the stunning success that season enjoyed, perhaps the best in TCP history. But success came at a price. The cost of hiring a resident director for the season was \$2,500, a small fortune at the time. This along with rising production costs, declining box office and what seemed to be an endless need to invest in the Studio, would, by the end of the decade, leave TCP cash strapped and dependent on advance sales of subscriptions for the next season to make ends meet.

Like all things physical, the Studio needed regular attention, something it didn't always get. Meeting minutes note TCP neighbors were less than thrilled with the appearance of the area around the Studio. Keeping things orderly inside was proving equally daunting, despite frequent workdays. Over time, costume storage was added. People were found to mow and help with "yard" improvements. Arrangements were worked out with neighbors on outdoor signs. Then, in 1966, a St. Claire Shores syndicate optioned TCP's property for \$42,000. The option would not be exercised but the idea of selling the Studio and starting over elsewhere became a regular topic of conversation.

In 1967 TCP began a series of popular, if not always financially successful, children's shows. And it began entering floats in the Blossom Parade, one of which took first place for originality. It cost \$165.60. Also, that year, TCP burned its old mortgage and, shortly thereafter, took out a new one to pay for an addition to the Studio. It would be named the Annex.

As the decade ended, even TCP's neighbors would have agreed that TCP was

looking good. But rumors persisted that the I-94 interchange was coming and, when it did, would consume the property where the Studio was located.

### **Twin City Players in the 1970s**

Twin City Players entered the decade of the 1970s in the red, depending on advanced ticket sales for the 1970-71 season to pay for the last show of 1969-70. To raise extra money, members held a car wash and ran a booth at a 16th Century Fair. To cut costs, the board abolished the resident director program – in the future, directors would receive a \$100 stipend only – and greatly simplified show programs, substituting program listings for paid advertising.

But there was little TCP could do about some expenses, like the increasingly high cost of renting school auditoriums. And finding suitable available dates was proving more and more difficult. Plans were drawn up to convert the TCP Studio into an intimate theater, but they were put on hold when it was confirmed in December 1970, that a new exit ramp for I-94 had been approved and would run right through TCP's property. Instead, TCP began an exhaustive search to find a new facility or property on which to build a new theater. No fewer than twelve properties were investigated by the TCP building committee in this somewhat desperate search for new accommodations.

In May 1971, the building committee reported "that no existing building is available in this area that would provide adequate facilities at a reasonable cost. Therefore, we have re-examined the possibility of converting the existing TCP studio to provide suitable short-term theatrical facilities, notwithstanding the likelihood of ultimate compulsory acquisition of the studio by the Michigan Department of Highways."

Thus, the plans to convert the Studio to a theater were resurrected and streamlined to cut costs. Members would do most of the work themselves. (The September 1971 *Curtain Call* asks members to please save 2 or 3 coffee cans to make into light fixtures). What the members couldn't do themselves, TCP would pay for from a building fund patiently and painstakingly accumulated over the years.

Construction of the 121-seat Studio Theater was completed over the summer and an open house was held October 24, 1971. It had cost under \$4,000 and operated in the black from the start. Furthermore, TCP would have its use for longer than expected - five and one-half years - as delays held up construction of the proposed I-94 ramp. The State finally claimed the property in December 1976, paying TCP just over \$50,000, plus an extra \$1,600 for the theater seats.

The tremendous effort to create the new Studio Theater didn't come without personal cost. Tempers occasionally flared. Meeting minutes speak to low morale as not enough people tried to do too much work. Some board members resigned, and the board was reduced from 11 to nine members. But meeting minutes and *Curtain Calls* also are full of wit and wry humor over their situation.

About the 1971-72 season, there was good news and bad news. The good news: Net income had never been greater, except during the "gold rush" of 1966. The bad news: So were expenses. The March 1973 financial report: "Broke." The April 1973 report: "Not quite so broke." (***Sweet Charity*** had earned about \$400.) The April 1974 financial report: Still solvent.

Given TCP's uprooting, it's not surprising that no meeting minutes survive from the middle of the decade of the 70s. We do know that the last two shows of the 1976-77 season were held in the Blue Lecture Hall at Lake Michigan College, and that all shows were staged at the Unitarian Church in St. Joseph for the next two seasons. Then the church was sold, and TCP again was on the move. ***The Fantasticks*** was staged at Upton Junior High before TCP returned to LMC, hopeful it would be able to finish the 1979-80 season in a new "little theater," then under construction at Lake Michigan College. Such was not to be and plans to again stage ***The Music Man*** were scrapped and ***Same Time Next Year*** instead opened in the Blue Lecture Hall, as had its immediate past predecessors.

Sometime in mid 1977, TCP acquired property on Glenlord Road that served as the St. Joseph School System's school bus barn. It continued to lease the barn to the system while it pondered what to do with the building. In January 1979, the board voted to convert the building into an approximate 150-seat theater. Plans were drawn up and TCP gratefully accepted and put into storage some 200 used-but-still-useful theater seats made available by the Berry Theater of Berrien Springs. Thus, as TCP moved into the 1980s, it was hoped that it soon would have a home of its own once again.

### **Twin City Players in the 1980s**

Twin City Players moved into the 1980s proud owners of a building, but not a home. The barn on Glenlord Road was an adequate enough space for school buses, but it fell woefully short of being suitable for human occupancy.

As a first step, the building committee set about solving severe drainage problems

that kept the building from being used for anything but storage. The board set about finding a place to stage productions. A contract was negotiated with Lake Michigan College to use its Little Theater for the 1980-81 season. As a result, TCP was the first to present a play on the new LMC stage, with ***The Unsinkable Molly Brown*** opening there October 17. But the cost of producing plays at LMC that season was double expectations and well beyond what TCP could comfortably afford.

After cutting the number of productions for the 1981-82 season to three, the TCP board worked out an agreement with the St. Joseph High School to use the auditorium there. In all, TCP would stay at the high school for three seasons before returning to the LMC Little Theater in the fall of 1984. During this time:

- The TCP board was increased in size from 9 to 11 members.
- A gala was held at the Travel Inn to celebrate TCP's 50th anniversary.
- Legal hurdles were cleared, and permits received to allow the barn to be converted into a small theater.
- An answering machine was purchased to help better manage reservations.

Hopes were high that the new theater would be ready for the 1985-86 season and plans were laid accordingly. They would prove as daunting as they were ambitious. At meetings and in articles in the *Curtain Call*, pleas went out for help with the renovation. Yet, as had been true for the Studio Theater, creating a working theater out of a damp, dirty, inhospitable barn of a space fell mostly to a small but determined group. Even so, they almost made it. At the last minute, the building inspector found reasons to withhold the necessary occupancy permit and ***Camelot*** was hastily moved to the LMC Little Theater. However, the new Playhouse was ready for the October opening of ***The Uninvited***, and it marked the beginning of a new era for TCP.

Very quickly, a five-show Mainstage season was established with eight performances of each show. There also were children's theater and second stage productions and an annual awards banquet to recognize outstanding performance. In 1988, the annual awards were re-named the Tiffany Awards in honor of Marion Tiffany, a longtime member of TCP and the only surviving member of the group that had started the organization in 1932.

Meeting minutes after the renovation speak of juggling payment of bills. But it took only a few seasons in the new Playhouse before TCP had itself on solid financial ground. As the decade advanced, the board continued to authorize improvements to the Playhouse. New theater seats were added. So was air conditioning. And the

price of a ticket increased to \$7 to help cover the cost. But as the decade ended, TCP already was out of room in its new home and the board began discussing options for expanding the theater or building a separate workshop to provide space for costume storage and set construction.

### **Twin City Players in the 1990s**

TCP entered the 1990s in the black and with a growing reputation for providing good family entertainment at a reasonable price. However, the Playhouse on Glenlord Road, created from the mud and debris of a school bus barn, wasn't making things easy.

There were no wings, no fly space, precious little room backstage and no storage. Sets had to be built in situ. Costumes had to be cared for away from the theater. The water was potable, but smelled and tasted terrible, and the two patron toilets had a habit of giving back some of what they took. People working on and in shows had to wait to use the bathrooms after patrons were seated and hope there were no emergencies.

Despite all, the experience of coming to a TCP performance was getting better and more people were taking advantage of the opportunity. A new reserved seating policy allowed patrons to arrive closer to curtain time. And stage lighting was improved, thanks to a grant from Whirlpool Foundation. *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* would set the modern record for attendance in 1995, when it ran for 17 sold-out performances in June and then was reprised for three benefit performances the following August.

Given staging and other limitations, TCP continued to consider alternatives. A local architect helped with plans for a new 250-seat theater and concepts were developed for improving the existing facility. However, the building fund had been exhausted when TCP paid \$10,000 to remove old underground diesel fuel tanks and another \$9,000 to improve the water situation and repair siding and eaves. To add to the uncertainty, TCP had never conducted a major fundraising campaign and didn't know how much support it could expect from the community. The board authorized a feasibility study to which revealed that, while most people felt positively about TCP, they didn't know enough about the organization or the need for a new theater to pledge large sums of money.

TCP spent the next few years expanding its outreach and building awareness of its



contribution to the community. It also approved a multi-phase renovation plan that included:

- Constructing a new costume storage and set building workshop.
- Renovating the existing theater in the Playhouse to bring it up to code.
- Adding new central heating and cooling systems, enlarging the bathrooms and making them handicapped accessible.
- Renovating the lobby, box office and concession areas to improve traffic flow and aesthetics.

The renovation was completed in 1998 and cost \$189,200. The concomitant capital campaign raised close to \$225,000, more than enough to pay for the renovation, a new roof, and a resurfaced parking lot as well. Many people and organizations made this possible and are recognized on a campaign honors wall in the Playhouse lobby and a small "honors" patio outside the Playhouse.

While plans for and actual work on the theater renovation took center stage for much of the decade, it was only one of several memorable events going on. The board established a scholarship fund and in 1996 awarded the first Brian Swiger Memorial Scholarship. Also in 1996, TCP learned it would be co-host with Lake Michigan College of the 1998 International Theater Festival. The last week of June, groups from 16 countries spent a week at the Mendel Center and left behind a legacy of extraordinary community theater.

In this new millennium, TCP will continue its efforts to improve the overall quality of its productions and, one day, achieve its dream of a small new theater on its Glenlord Road property.