

Orpheum not just a building, but a source of joy

Judy Diemer, a Prairie Players Civic Theater volunteer for many years, has written a letter to the editor of the Register-Mail, reviewing the role of Prairie Players in the development of the Orpheum Theater. Everyone should read it. The community should know that if it weren't for Prairie Players, the oldest community theater group in Illinois, the Orpheum would have gone to seed years ago. I also know the Prairie Players board and members have voluntarily given their all—in time, energy, talent and money to maintain the theater while trying to continue the Prairie Players program.

Choral Dynamics, Community Chorus, Prairie Players, Community Theater, Knox Galesburg Symphony, American Red Cross, Downtown Council, United Way, are just some of the local groups who use the Orpheum for performances and fundraisers. Scheduled now are the Prairie Players summer musical, "Anything Goes," beginning next week and the Stearman USO show in September.

We have this disease in Galesburg that seems to surface with every local issue—people flapping at the mouth who don't have a clue, as they say.

I've been active with Prairie Players off and on over a period of 30 years. I have never served on the board. As someone who has been in productions and on crews for makeup, props, costumes and scenery, I have the highest respect for the people who are involved with Prairie Players. People have questioned their management of the theater. Probably some mistakes have been made, but the organization has made it clear on numerous occasions they would rather be doing anything but managing that huge, old, beautiful, maintenance-ridden building. They like to produce, act, sing, design scenery, direct. They are all people who have "day jobs" but do this for the love of theater. And it's hard work.

Prairie Players was where I made my first friends in Galesburg, acting in "Thurber's Carnival" in the Losey Street theater in 1971. My children and I helped with props and lights at the former Sheraton dinner theater. Nothing could have startled me more than seeing my oldest daughter checking the lighting connections before a performance and watching her little blonde head behind the light board working the lights during the performance. The lighting director, Larry Diemer, knew she could do it. And she did. My other daughter and I did props, dressed in our black clothing, scurrying on and off stage. My son, too young at the time to help, watched practices every night, fascinated. This theater group is a family.

My last experience with Prairie Players was in 1995 when we did "Fiddler on the Roof." I had a bit part and was part of the women's chorus. Even though it was 95 degrees the weeks of dress rehearsal and performances, and we had to dress in winter clothing, it was a highlight of my life. Such talented people directed the music, the play, and the production.

Every show in that theater represents that kind of hard work and involvement of people in Galesburg and surrounding areas. It's always a miracle to me that a housewife from Alpha, for example, wanders on stage and sets the theater on fire with her voice in "Sound of Music." That people we sit next to in church or at work have beautiful voices, can dance, are comedians and good actors. The talent surrounding us is truly amazing and a blessing to this community.

I believe that most music soothes the soul. On television this

week I saw little two-year-olds in Venezuela being taught how to play musical instruments as part of that country's huge commitment to music. Thousands of children become musicians, from little hamlets in the mountains and the ghettos of the cities. The music raises them above it all and literally gives them hope and a life.

Is it asking too much of this community to support the center of our cultural activity? I don't think so. I happen to think music and art and theater are basic

necessities of life. I would ask the County Board and City Council to quit worrying about who manages the theater and address the broader question of how to preserve a building, a tradition, a source of joy in our lives, as both performers and listeners. And the rest of us need to do the same. We need to call the Orpheum or the Civic Center Authority board and ask, "What can I do to help save the Orpheum?"

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer from Galesburg who can be reached at (309) 342 1337 or cporter@galesburg.net.

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