

Theatre Guild, Opal,
and Liberace too
**Tales of Earlier
Years**
By Bob Dewel

How many local groups count their age as 60 or more? Except for the churches, lodges, and government, not many can make that claim. This article is about the Baraboo Theatre Guild, now stronger and more vigorous than ever as it enters its 7th decade. What's more, they enter it with a play about a girl, Opal, of whom it is said "Everybody Loves Opal". Don't miss it. Also, don't miss the end of this article, with a surprise mention of both Liberace and Victor Borge.

The Inspirational Days

Well, O.K. that paragraph is partly a pitch for the play of that name, showing at the Farm Kitchen Dinner Theatre eight times, starting February 5. We'll use more space, however, to note the Baraboo Theatre Guild's arrival at its 61st anniversary. Unlike many groups, we have the exact date of its inception, February 9, 1947, at the USO rooms on Third Avenue over what was then Cashman's Garage. Even the time, 2:30 P.M., is noted.

The official organizational meeting, however, was Monday October 13, 1947, with Clyde Cross as President, Ernest Isenberg Vice-President, Kathryn Page Secretary, and Joseph Dunne, Treasurer. Enthusiasm was so great however, that a committee had already met in September at the home of Esther Brannon, with tryouts for the first show being made even before the official organizational meeting.

Such enthusiasm appears to be lasting, because we actually have two local persons from those formative days who are still active in the Guild; it is

unclear whether they were at the founding meeting, but Avy Schilling and Lorraine Kindschi were in on the founding of the Guild. They remain active and contributing members of the group yet today, 61 years later!

Early Productions

Among those at the Brannon home on Sept. 15 were Marjorie Stekl, Irene Seward Harradan, Ione Horstman, and Margaret Allen. This core group selected the first production, "January Thaw", and scheduled tryouts for October 2 in the basement of the Library. Talk about speed, they produced the play in one month, which showed on October 4, 1947 for one night only at the Al Ringling Theatre. Hitting the ground running, they then produced the well-known "Arsenic and Old Lace" the following April. As they say, 'the rest is history', and what a great history it is.

There is an even earlier credit to be made, for the idea came out of a Baraboo High School class taught by Art Gilbert. His enterprising students conceived the project as a means of raising money for a community center, then being promoted by a group called the Million Dimes. The AAUW had members who were interested, and a meeting with Gibson provided the beginning for the Guild. Great oaks grow from small acorns, in this case a high school class!

The Guild and the Theatre

It seems incredible that it had not happened before, considering the presence of Baraboo's amazing facility, the Al Ringling Theatre. Baraboo taxpayers have never had to build a civic auditorium, thanks to the generosity of Al. Ringling. Moreover, his theatre paid taxes for 75 years, which civic centers don't do. Only recently have Reedsburg and Sauk Prairie built civic center auditoriums, with taxpayer expenses running in the multi-millions. Even so, they have a seating capacity smaller than that in the Ringling Theatre, and a Spartan décor.



ARMS AND THE MAN

Baraboo had been a good theatre town from 1915 to the early forties, with the Al. Ringling theatre regularly bringing in performers from the national arts circuit. This practice had gradually tapered off in the 1940's with the arrival of talking pictures and their spectaculars. People forgot about the perfection of live performances. Now, with the Theatre Guild, the area could enjoy live theatre in splendid surroundings, just as we do today. Now we have both: the lavish musicals of the Guild and the polished performances of the professional artists brought in by the Theatre managements.

Speaking of outside talent which comes to the Ringling Theatre—don't be too eager to put those performers down as second rate. Someday their name may dominate the entertainment world! Skeptical? Consider Liberace, the late pianist with a flair for gaudy costumes, who dominated the national TV performance venues in the 60's and 70's. I have evidence that he once played in Baraboo!

I've been unable to track down the dates, but an undated newspaper clipping which I have refers to his appearance in Baraboo a few years previously. Obviously he was not famous yet, and today the artists brought in by the Ringling Theatre Friends may not have achieved prominence yet either. Just remember Liberace. He went on from Baraboo in about 1939 to the pinnacles of the entertainment world.

Incidentally, how many remember that a personal aide to famed pianist Victor Borge was a Baraboo boy, Jim Colias? As a youth, Colias took organ lessons from Claissa Morse, long time organist at the Methodist Church, where Colias also played. . James Colias is listed on the internet with Borge as a producer and personal aide. Another Baraboo youth who made good!

