

Mira, Mira on the wall—Oh, the tales this theater can tell

By Nancy Dingler

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VALLEJO—At the close of World War II, the employees and enlisted men and women who were stationed at Mare Island needed an outlet, something to break up the boredom. The Mare Island Recreation Association decided to form a theater group. From these practical beginnings, the theatrical troupe would grow and flourish and contribute in no small measure to the cultural and civic life of the Vallejo area.

Gaining approval from the commandant of Mare Island Naval Base, the new association was quick to secure for its members such facilities as the MIRA ball park on Springs Road, the MIRA gymnasium on the Senior High School campus and the tennis courts on Louisiana Street.

When the high school was razed to make way for a newer building, MIRA moved its program to the YMCA gym on Santa Clara Street. These facilities were the source of many thousands of hours of fun.

In October 1946, a small group of people met at the Vallejo Junior College, called together by Hal Heaton, vice president of the Mare Island Recreation Association. Heaton had been appointed by that organization as theatrical chairman, with the purpose of organizing a Community Little Theater group for Mare Island and the city of Vallejo.

The new group staged such hits as the “Mare Island Follies,” “The First Year,” “Suds in Your Eye,” “The Ghost Train,” “George Washington Slept Here,” “Three’s A Family” and “Kiss and Tell.”

Originally, members of the stage productions would rehearse and put on their plays at different school auditoriums, not having a home of their own. Then on Jan. 30, 1947, the MIRA Theatre Guild took a small step toward independence when it was chartered as a separate organization, although still sponsored by the Mare Island Recreation Association.

Under this newly formed group, the first production was “Doughgirls” performed at the old Vallejo High School auditorium. One of the early members, though not part of the founding of the group, was a young actress, Dollie Nunn. Her husband, Richard, joined

her. They would become an important driving force to the success and direction of the company.

In the late 1950s, the group moved to Hogan High auditorium until its new home at the Bay Terrace Theatre was finished in the mid-'60s. During the next 55 years, Mira produced more than 200 plays and hundreds, maybe thousands, of actors and volunteers who were "bitten by the theater bug" continued to keep Mira Theatre alive and viable.

Somewhere along the way, the name Mira no longer stood for Mare Island Recreation Association, but was named after a star that was discovered in 1596 by a Dutch astronomer, David Fabricius. Fabricius named his star o Ceti. Later it was renamed Mira, meaning "wonderful," and was the first-known variable star, which indicates that it changes brightness periodically, as have the fortunes of the theater group.

The 1950s and '60s were the golden years for Mira. During the early '50s, the group would go out to the community at Christmas-time to sing carols along the streets. In 1953, the group had the loan of a small organ that was strapped to the cab of a flatbed truck to accompany the dozen or more singers.

By 1954, the Mira theatrical company was well known and highly respected and naturally brought to mind when a committee decided to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the founding of Mare Island by Commodore David G. Farragut. The city of Vallejo and Mare Island threw considerable energy and funds into the planned extravaganza to take place Sept. 16-19. The extravaganza was called "Century Triumphant."

The centerpiece was a four-story stage that would showcase 800 people in 90 minutes with pageantry, music, dancing, dramatics, historical depictions, narrations and personal portrayals, telling the thrilling story of how Mare Island was established and developed into one of the most important naval installations in the nation.

The 800 people directly involved in the show included the professional actors of Mira. The theatrical group would perform 12 scenes, which portrayed life at Mare Island and Vallejo from the "days of Admiral Farragut to the present."

The gigantic pageant was presented on a specially constructed stage, a huge open affair adapted for staging a show of this stature.

The four-story structure was built so that five or six small stages and the main stage could be contained within. The stage took on the appearance of a building scaffolding at first sight until the house lights went down and it became a dazzling setting for the show. The show was performed at night under the stars.

The huge production was directed by Mr. J. Fenton McKenna, chairman of the drama department at San Francisco State College, along with his able assistant, Miss Virginia Cox, also a teacher. Taking care of props and costumes was just one of their chores.

Miss Cox said that “people had been wonderful in Vallejo. Everyone we have contacted for something unusual in the way of props has come through strong. For instance, we said we needed an old-fashioned organ grinder and monkey, never dreaming we could find one.

“But who should call us, but Doc Webb, the tattoo artist on Georgia Street. Not only did he have the organ, but he had the monkey, too. He said he didn’t think the monkey would perform for anyone but him, but he would be glad to let us use the organ.”

The huge production’s narrator was Jack Cahill, who was a famous San Francisco radio announcer. Jack not only supplied the voice, but also the horse. Mare Island was named for Gen. M.G. Vallejo’s horse, who had been captured on the island. Cahill had a white mare that appeared on stage portraying the general’s famous mare.

In 1955, the play “Mr. Roberts” not only drew large audiences, but a lot of laughs because one of the key “actors” was a goat named Brunhilde. Brunhilde was not the only animal to be used in a production.

The Mira Little Theatre from the beginning awarded “Oscars” for the best performances. One of the winners during the seventh annual awards in 1953 was Dollie and Richard Nunn’s cocker spaniel, who was awarded a plaque for her performance as “Flush” in the “Barretts of Wimpole Street.”

Dollie Nunn, formerly of the supply department on Mare Island, her husband, Dick, a planner, and their cocker spaniel swept the awards. Dollie shared top female acting honors with Helen Seeley for their work in “My Sister Eileen” while Dick was nominated for the best supporting male role in “Father of the Bride.”

The annual awards ceremony was held at the Vallejo college and drew several hundred people. 1953 was the first year that the awards ceremony had been open to the public. Al St. John was the emcee for the evening, while J. Mills Adair was the master of ceremonies for the second portion of the program, which featured the “Oscar” awards. Adair was one of the original charter members.

The Bay Terrace Theatre had originally been a grammar school constructed in the 1920s. During WWII, the building was used for artillery. Then around 1959 the area suffered an earthquake, which prompted the closure of the school.

Every organization needs an energetic and enthusiastic “doer.” The whirlwind for the Mira Theatre Guild came in the form of the diminutive and talented artist Dollie Nunn. Dollie, along with her husband, Richard, lobbied to get the abandoned school for their theatrical group. They succeeded and were handed the key in 1962.

Mira finally had a permanent home at the Bay Terrace. The staple productions in the 1940s and ‘50s were light comedy and some musicals. By the time the Nunns spearheaded the group, the focus was on dramatic plays.

In 1997, the group decided that the “Oscar” ceremony should undergo a change. In honor of the hard work, dedication and drive to keep Mira alive, the group changed the award to the “Dollies” in recognition of Dollie Nunn. Dollie suffered a long illness, finally succumbing in 2003.

The thespians kept producing at least four productions a year. During the ‘80s, such fare as “Barefoot in the Park” by Neil Simon and the “Odd Couple” were presented, along with “Saving Grace” and “Under the Yum Yum Tree.”

In 1995 the outstanding production of August Wilson’s “Piano Lesson” marked the beginning of Mira’s ethnic diversity.

Stellar directors found their way to Mira recently. Carlene Collier Coury directed “Prelude to a Kiss” in 1999. Coury’s first play, “The Gin Game” received critical acclaim and garnered five Dollie awards, including best production of the 1997-‘98 season. That was followed by sweeping 11 Dollies the next season.

Harry Diavatis became president of Mira for the 2001-‘02 season. He was awarded the Solano County Arty Award four times for best production, “Romantic Comedy” and “Night Watch” and best direction for “Haunting of Hill House” and “Romantic Comedy.” The 2003-‘04 season has produced the “Sunshine Boys” and “Laura.”

Currently, Mira is undergoing another change. Victor Lawhorn wrote a children’s musical adventure entitled “Dragonville U.S.A.,” which premiered in January.

Lawhorn created the children’s play with two goals in mind: It is Mira Theatre’s first-ever children’s production and more importantly, the play was a fund-raiser for the decaying theater.

“The theater has not had the money to make any repairs,” Lawhorn said. “There is a leak in the building. The entire parking lot needs to be paved, there are electrical problems. The building is in dire need of repairs.”

Over the years, many devoted fans and volunteers have been “angels” to Mira,

perhaps none as generous as Joan Burt, who, shortly before her death, gave Mira \$15,000, which allowed for the purchase of an \$11,000 state-of-the-art light board. This apparatus provides the stage lighting that evokes the mood of the scene.

The theater's future lies in the aspirations of people like Lawhorn; Liz Mitchell, president of Mira; Paula McConnell, guild secretary; and high school volunteer William Ryan Lombard. Perhaps their goal of reviving the theatrical tradition will inspire others with the desire to "trod the boards" to come forward in the theater's time of need and help rescue the building and aid in its revival.

For more information on how to help with the theater's restoration, contact Liz Mitchell at 645-8110 or 1hamiam@prodigy.net or Paula McConnell at 644-3262. Or write to the Mira Theatre Guild, 51 Daniels Ave., Vallejo.

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