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## Successful Community Theater

# A Paycheck? Forget It!



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For the past eight years the Fort Mill Community Playhouse has been astounding its audiences with full length musicals of professional quality.

How did a small community theater group become so good?

Those involved with the Playhouse describe a love for the community and the tireless dedication of volunteers as forces that inspire them more than a paycheck ever could.

"Everybody who has anything to do with the Playhouse is a star," said Brenda Little, choral director for the Playhouse from the beginning. "Everybody pulls together. There are no main stars. The prop people are just as important as the actors," she added. "This is fun. It is the attitude of the people that makes it so successful."

Tom Beaty, an architect with Springs Industries, has worked with the Playhouse in various ways since the first play in 1980. He agrees that it is the hard work of volunteers that has set the Fort Mill Playhouse apart from other community theaters.

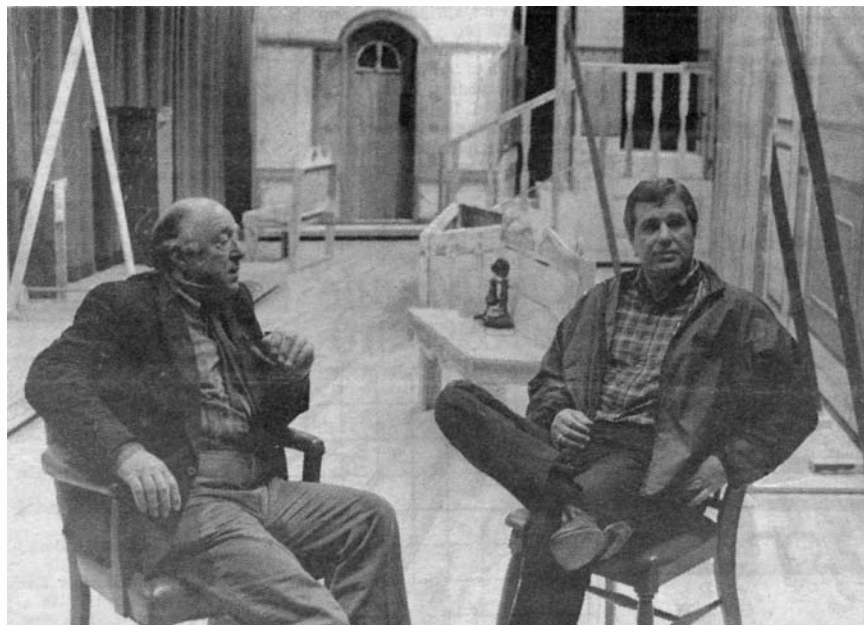
"They all work together for a common goal. Seeing the show is rewarding because it is a community effort," Beaty added.

Robert L. Reid, president of Leroy Springs and Co. first suggested the idea of a community theater in 1979. Several neighboring communities already had this type of activity and he felt that Fort Mill needed one too.

Reid proposed his idea to Steve McCrae, now retired from his job as director of art services for Springs Industries, and Howard Knox, executive director of the Leroy Springs and Co. recreation department in Fort Mill. "The Playhouse is a direct result of our philosophy," said Knox.

They recruited help from local residents interested in theater and soon selected their first play for production.

McCrae recalls paying \$150 to \$200 for the rights to the play



## Center Stage

Steve McCrae (left) and Howard Knox relax among the 'My Fair Lady' sets. McCrae and Knox were instrumental, along with others, in starting the Fort Mill Community Playhouse.

"Spring For Sure." McCrae had seen the play performed earlier and liked the large cast and musical numbers in it.

The organizers quickly realized that they needed a professional director. Scott Miller, a professional dancer from Charlotte was hired to direct and choreograph the play. It was his first experience with directing, said Knox, but he impressed the Playhouse so much that he returned as director next year.

That first play was held in May, 1980 under a large circus tent on the Recreation Complex grounds. Volunteers worked hundreds of hours building sets, erecting the tent and sewing costumes, said Knox. Everyone felt the show was a raging success, he added.

Beaty was the stage manager

for that first play. "I had no idea what a stage manager's job consisted of," he said.

It wasn't long before Reid recognized the need for a formal organization to select and produce the community plays in the future. So in October of 1980, the Fort Mill Community Playhouse was formed with Beaty as the first chairman. The group, under the direction of Leroy Springs, formed its own board of directors. Members worked to raise money from outside sources to help produce the next play, Knox said.

Successful plays continued year after year, and in 1986 the Playhouse was granted a non-profit organization charter. The group took on full responsibility for production and financing of productions.

The Playhouse is supported by corporate sponsors, memberships, state grants and ticket sales, said Knox. He added that each of these sources is important to the survival of the theater.

Over the years, the plays have been polished performances of professional quality. But all has not been perfect behind the scenes.

In 1982, the Playhouse members thought they had found a home at A.O. Jones School auditorium. Members extended the stage, installed tracks for sliding curtains and scenery, and built an orchestra pit.

Unfortunately, the auditorium burned and in 1986 the play returned to the circus tent, this time on Tom Hall Street. Knox said he borrowed eight kerosene

heaters to warm the audience on the cool March nights.

There was a spark of excitement throughout the Playhouse group when they opened their 1987 production of "The Sound of Music" in the new Fort Mill High School auditorium, Knox said. The group finally had found a permanent home.

Finding a performance home hasn't been the only problem for the Playhouse, Knox adds. Three times, the group has been forced to find a new location to store the huge sets. "Every time we found a place, the building was soon torn down," Knox said. The sets are now stored at the old National Guard Armory on Elliott Street.

The Playhouse has been blessed over the years with an abundance of talent and eager volunteers, according to Helen Johnson, who has been designing and sewing costumes for the Playhouse for the past seven years.

Even though the Playhouse is an amateur group, Johnson says that every year the plays get more professional, "and every year, the new play seems like the best ever."

The Playhouse has been important to the Fort Mill community, says McCrae. "It gets people of all ages and interests involved in a community project. It provides an outlet for people to enjoy their talents in a family atmosphere."

Knox is proud of the accomplishments of the Playhouse. It was created to provide a new activity and make the quality of life better, he said.

"It did it. It recognized talent in people who never thought they would be on stage, and now they are."

The Fort Mill Community Playhouse will present "MY Fair Lady" March 9-12 at 8 p.m. each night at the Fort Mill High School auditorium. Tickets are \$6 and are available at the Leroy Springs Recreation Complex, The Hull House, Video Plus and at the door.