

**GREEN ROOM PLAYERS OF GREENFIELD,  
MASSACHUSETTS:  
BRINGING COMMUNITY THEATER INTO THE  
COMMUNITY**

**Ruby L. Ordinario Agnir**

**ABSTRACT**

**W**ell documented as being the most widely attended venue for theater in America, community theater is a very important vehicle in establishing many aspects of a community's cultural and social life. Community theater puts into practice notions of how plays could energize and benefit all those who had dealings with it. Since its founding in 1983, the Green Room Players has offered opportunities for the full diversity of the community to engage in meaningful exploration through play production. By presenting new or unfamiliar, as well as familiar plays, the Green Room Players brings the transformative power of theater to audiences of Greenfield, Massachusetts. For the Green Room Players, every performance draws an impressive commitment from each individual as they share a sense of having created something significant both in terms of the play and its effect on the intellectual and emotional development of their community.

**WHAT IS COMMUNITY THEATER?**

It is the form of theater, perhaps the most popular form, in which all or most of the people involved are amateurs, that is, unpaid. Usually, only the director, the musicians, the choreographer, the set designer, the set builders, and the lighting designer are paid fees. The actors, however, receive no remuneration.

This does not mean that community theater is of lower quality than professional theater. A great number of community theaters in the U.S. have gained a large degree of respectability. Personally, I have watched many, many Broadway and off-Broadway

productions, and can say unflinchingly that I have worked with community theater actors who are as good as or even better than some of the paid performers in New York. In fact, a great number of professional artists in the theater admit beginning their career in community theater.

Actors and staff members of community theaters are diverse individuals who are usually in other professions as well. From church ministers, health care providers, lawyers and teachers, to students, waitresses, janitors, or even jobless persons, community theater finds nuggets of theatrical talent that eventually explode into full-blown stage artistry.

Needless to say, a great difference between professional theater and community theater lies in the stage director's expectations of the actors. Because a professional actor's job is the theater production he or she is in, the actor's timetable is based on the requirements of the production. Rehearsal time and frequency are nailed down and the actor has to "punch the clock" accordingly. Because the production is the actor's job, the actor puts 100% into the role, studying it, researching into the relevant aspects of his role and the play as a whole, and learning the lines within the expected time before "off-books." If the play is a musical, music and words must be memorized very early in the preparation period. Dance routines call for mastering the dance steps and developing the precision and grace needed in as short a time as possible. An actor's entire physical state and mental set have just one focus—the strength and exactness of the characterization to contribute to the director's vision of the play, which in turn ensures the success of the show.

In contrast, community theater performers have to juggle their time, physical state, and mental set between the various hats they wear—most especially their careers, their families, their membership in civic organizations, their church, and whatever emergencies and conflicts may come up relative to all these. Sometimes, community theater is at the lowest end of an individual's priority totem pole. To many others, involvement in community

theater is very important, so that it could rival the importance of some of their other activities. This depends greatly on what they get from such an involvement. To most non-professional actors, the theater gives them the opportunity to escape from the real world; to become someone different from what they really are, to exhibit their histrionic and musical talents that they know they have, and to have fun. More importantly, community theater is a place to find and meet other people with the same interest and following the same quest. Where the production's atmosphere is pleasant, lasting friendships and even love relationships have been known to flourish.

### **QUESTIONS ABOUT HAVING AN ACTIVE COMMUNITY THEATER IN A COMMUNITY**

What good is having a theater in a community? What does a theater offer that movies and TV shows do not or cannot? My experience as founding and artistic director of a community theater group in Massachusetts, U.S.A. can provide some answers to these questions.

Franklin County, located in Western Massachusetts, has its seat in a small (18,000 population) town called Greenfield. Although merely a small dot on the map, this New England County boasts of a decades-old symphony orchestra, a 100-voice symphony chorus, an opera company, several concert bands, a few coffeehouses that provide a venue for budding folksingers and improv actors, a dozen or so dance studios, and numerous community theater organizations.<sup>1</sup>

In 1974, when we arrived in Greenfield, there were two community theater groups in existence, Arena Civic Theater and The Country Players. After getting involved with both of these companies, and liking the experiences, I decided to form a third theater company, Green Room Players, in 1983 to help meet the burgeoning interest in and tacit demand for theater in the county. "Green room" refers to that room or area backstage where actors prepare before a performance or wait while they are not needed on stage. This became the name of the company.

---

Although GRP was not established to be a rival, it had to be different in some aspects from the existing ones. Ideas emerged that gave rise to objectives for the new company.

### **OBJECTIVES OF GREEN ROOM PLAYERS**

- *To provide a training place for those who have talents in the theater arts, young or old, novice or experienced.*

At no time does one really achieve one's optimum level. There is always room for improvement, and the pursuit of excellence must continue. Participating in my company, actors realized this was what I offered and some of those who started with me are now professionals on the stage, including Broadway, as well as in California, Germany, and elsewhere. Working with the inexperienced and the very young, one needs to bear in mind that a child never forgets his/her first director. If the experience was genial and pleasurable, that child would continue to pursue theater. Conversely, if disagreeable, theater would not become a future endeavor. Happily, those who had their start with Green Room Players have continued to get involved in succeeding plays of the company, as their schoolwork allowed them to, as well as in their own school plays.

Once a teacher always a teacher, so the saying goes. I became known as a "teaching director," for I loved sharing what I knew and believed in, as well as relaying "trade secrets" gleaned from my experiences as an actress and director. Green Room Players suddenly became a hands-on training ground in the theatrical arts. Comments or remarks to correct and improve a scene or a character interpretation have been given like classroom lectures and how-to instructions to the entire company. This way, the entire company learned, instead of an individual performer singled out for correction.

- ***To provide an opportunity for the staging of unknown or relatively unfamiliar plays, as well as familiar plays that had not been shown in the area for at least 9 or 10 years.***

There are thousands and thousands of plays waiting to be performed, as several theater library catalogs attest. The Samuel French, Inc. Catalog itself has at least 4,000 titles. Green Room Players offers only two productions a year: a full-length (i.e., 3-act) comedy in the spring and a full-length musical in the summer. Among the first productions of Green Room Players were the comedies *The Second Time Around*, *One Toe in the Grave*, *Let's Murder Marsha*, *Our Gal Sal*, none of which was known nor performed to area audiences. The earliest musical production was composed of two unfamiliar fairy tales: *The Magic Nutmeg-Grater* and *The Toymaker*. This was followed by Rodgers and Hart's *Babes in Arms*, and the heretofore-unperformed (beyond Broadway) musical plays: *Snoopy*, *A Wonderful Life*, and *Barnum*. Ten years after I played Bloody Mary in *South Pacific*, I decided to bring the play to the community once more, this time under my direction. It was followed by *Grease*, which had not been performed in the area and for which a special permit to produce had to be obtained because it was currently being performed professionally in New York and by a touring company. A favorite staple of high schools but not of community theater groups, *Bye Bye Birdie* followed. *Pajama Game* was next; it had never been shown in Western Massachusetts. Happily, in spite of the unfamiliarity of most of the plays to audiences and critics, all of these productions were well received and given rave reviews by community critics, one of whom referred to this director as "the community's musical theater maven."

- ***To provide clean entertainment — no smut, no nudity, no gore***

Great care needs to be taken in choosing scripts. Green Room Players' productions have always been known to be suitable

and enjoyable for the entire family, which means delightful G-rated entertainment. They had to be clean in language and action. "Dirty" language in any chosen play needs to be replaced — unless it is essential to characterization of a particular role. More often than not, "dirty" words are not essential and good plays can stand without them. In addition, since suggestion is powerful in art, violence need not be recreated in detail in community theater. Unless it is the core of the play itself, such as the torturous and brutal death of Jesus in Mel Gibson's acclaimed movie, *The Passion*, violence in community theater should only be suggested via the acting and reacting of the performers. Similarly, nudity can only be hinted at or worked out so that the nakedness of an actor, if indeed necessary, is not exposed to the viewers. What would be the purpose of nudity on the stage or realistic violence for that matter? The question that needs to be answered concerning dirty language, nudity, or gore is "Can the play communicate the playwright's message without rendering such objectionable things realistically?"

***To be a vehicle for fund-raising to benefit charitable and non-profit organizations.***

This is the objective that truly differentiates Green Room Players from all the other theater groups. The only people who receive any kind of monetary remuneration are the technical and professional members of the staff, such as the lighting designer, music director, and pianist, set designer and construction, and choreographer. The rest, including the director, actors, and stage crew, give their time and talent as a labor of love. A few times, because of the generosity of the sponsor of a particular production, this director received a gift of 5%-10% of the proceeds. Otherwise, all the proceeds have gone to non-profit agencies picked for a particular production.

In order to be able to donate a respectable amount of money, the productions have had to cut corners. First to do away with are *expensive sets*. An insightful director will choose a script

carefully. There are so many scripts designed with a "bare stage" in mind, that a good one which requires very little alteration can be easily found. It is one of the particular knacks of being a director in this genre. The director can work in earnest with the set designers so that minimal sets are used. One interior set is generally sufficient in the case of many plays. Believing in the power of suggestion in any artistic endeavor, actors recognize that it is the quality of their acting, singing, or dancing that could mesmerize the audience, and not spectacular sets or backdrops. Having jaw-dropping sets seldom guarantees a great production.

*Extravagant costumes* are the next to reject. The director either chooses a play that does not require them or, following the idea of the power of suggestion, hires a costumer who can create apparel that just hints at the actual costumes. *Technically complex lighting design and equipment* can be rejected, too. A truly creative lighting designer can produce suggestive lighting instead of elaborate and expensive technical effects.

Because cuts in expenses have been taken, Green Room Players has been able to give respectable amounts of monetary donations from the proceeds of each production. Beneficiaries of GRP productions include churches, public schools, The Salvation Army, as well as charitable organizations including the Order of the Eastern Star, Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association, and ALS Research under the aegis of the Muscular Dystrophy Association. MDA honored Green Room Players with an award for strengthening awareness in and supporting the research for ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis known as Lou Gehrig's Disease), to which it has donated a total of \$9,000. Needless to say, the cast and crew of each production have been living up to the GRP motto: "Helping Others while Having Fun."

- ***To develop a family-type environment that can result in long-term friendships among members of the company.***

Over the years of GRP's existence, about 50 people have continued to be in its productions. The warmth and congeniality that was fostered in every GRP production company have resulted in life-long friendships. A mother-children relationship between director and the actors continually emerges. The actors are the director's "surrogate children." Such a relationship is impossible to achieve without the director working hard at establishing it and making it a personal goal. One of the ways a pleasant working atmosphere can pervade is the rejection of "prima donnas" and other destructive personalities—the know-it-alls, the I-am-better-than-you, the directorial and managerial individuals, and the like. Jealousies must be nipped in the bud, although sometimes it is good to give these people a second chance if they have potentially great talent.

While actors are given leeway to express their own interpretation of the characters they are playing, they have to understand and accept that the director is the authority, right or wrong, and that a production must be the director's vision. If their interpretation agrees with the director's vision, then it is acceptable and, therefore, incorporated. If it is not, then what the director wants goes.

### **THE PRODUCTION IS THE DIRECTOR'S VISION**

Many times, the director's vision is vastly different from how a play has been shown in film and other theater productions. There is no "one way" of producing even the most popular plays. The Broadway production or a movie rendering is not the only way a play can be interpreted. A case in point is *Brigadoon*, the popular musical about a Scottish island that appears only once in a hundred years. The film version was reoriented to showcase the dancing talents of Cyd Charisse and Gene Kelly. The stage play, on the other hand, requires that the characters Cyd Charisse and Gene Kelly portrayed sing beautifully and do not need to dance. *The King and I* is another example of a play that can be produced in many ways. Yul Brynner, although much touted as the



consummate “king,” interpreted the role in a way unacceptable to this director. Brynner was so strong a personality that he failed to convincingly show moments of weakness when the king’s passion for bringing western culture to his country clashed with his desire to be a good king to his people. (Also, King Mongkut, the historical basis for this character, had a full head of hair!) Fortunately, some succeeding “kings” have done better — Lou Diamond Phillips and Stacy Keach, to name a few.

Furthermore, the actors need to understand and accept that when they are not cast in the role they want there is only one reason: the role does not fit them or they do not fit the role, according to the director’s vision. Another more appropriate role in another play may be waiting for them. It is as simple as that. This attitude encourages actors to be happy with whatever roles are assigned to them, and to recognize that there are no small roles. When all of this is achieved, a wonderful ambience is generated.

### **WHAT THE COMMUNITY GAINS FROM HAVING A COMMUNITY THEATER**

To go back to the questions posed earlier, what does a community gain from community theater?

First, people’s participation in the arts, in general, and theater, in particular, has a profound influence on their future life direction. Once-introverted personalities have become more outgoing and more confident in social intercourse. Drifting, aimless teenagers have found a niche in community theater in which they find better use of their time and have learned to handle responsibility. Other people have become leaders in the community and they find that delivering speeches in front of an audience has become a comfortable undertaking when earlier they would have refused to do so. Still others have become happier realizing they have a world to escape to from their day-to-day cares. Participants in community theater have become individuals whose self-esteem has been elevated to a

high degree, and are psychologically ready to get involved with other community activities.

Second, working with various kinds of personalities toward a common goal is a great training tool for handling non-theatrical community goals. People-skills are developed. Respect for authority becomes second nature. Community theater can lay the groundwork for good citizenship and leadership - especially for the young.

Third, because of the participants' involvement in other aspects of their community, community theater usually has a broad base of support. Its productions are patronized by people who know some of the members of the cast or the production crew, people who otherwise would not attend theater productions. Giving support to community theater becomes a familiar and even traditional activity for many people, which eventually leads to a willingness to give support to non-theatrical activities of the community.

### **TYPES OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT**

Community support comes in various forms. The community can show its support for and meet the needs of community theater by many ways.

The most overt is *monetary donations from businesses and individuals*. Thus, a production can have a list of donors that could be categorized according to the amount they give. A common way of categorizing is the use of such terms as "Benefactors," "Patrons," "Angels," and "Friends."

Another type of support is *buying of advertising space in the playbill* (the show's printed program) by businesses and institutions. An entire page can be worth \$100; half page \$50; and a quarter page \$25. \$10 could include a person's name on a list of "Friends."

A third type is *donations of food and cold drinks by grocery stores*. During the intermission, a food concession stand

may be opened to sell soda and cookies at a low price. The grocery-store donations can help boost proceeds.

In addition, *other simple moneymaking activities* can be held at the entrance to the auditorium. Souvenir T-shirts, ball caps, magnets, etc. could be ordered from a local printing company at minimal cost, or even as a donation in exchange for ad space in the playbill, and then sold to the theatergoers. A "telegram" table could be set up where "telegrams" are sold to theatergoers. These are handed by runners to friends or family who are members of the cast. Other souvenirs, such as fans for a hot evening, could be sold at minimum cost, perhaps 50 cents or less per fan.

One very important community theater need is space. The community could *provide performance and rehearsal space*. If there is no auditorium with a stage specifically designed for theater, community buildings with large halls are often utilized for theater productions. Churches, schools, and other buildings with lecture halls either rent their space out to the theater company or sometimes offer it for use free of charge.

### **STRAIGHT DRAMA**

As director, I have stayed away from heavy or straight drama for one reason. Experience has shown that people go to watch a play that entertains them and makes them forget for two hours their day-to-day problems. This has been proven time and time again by the small number of theatergoers that attend straight drama presentations compared to those who fill the house to watch musicals and comedies.

There is a place for what can be termed as a "community play" or "political play." These plays are specially written and adapted for the community to express specific wishes, needs, concerns, political beliefs; or to celebrate an event. The production of such a play is usually of interest to a specific group. An example would be a play about battered women. There are other media that address social, political, moral,

ethical problems in a serious manner, even write plays and produce them. They should be encouraged to do it.

### **KEY PERSONNEL OF A COMMUNITY THEATER COMPANY**

Community theater requires the collaboration of a number of talented people. Not counting the playwright, (and composer and lyricist, in case of musicals), the top business person is the *Producer*. He/She enters into a contract with the theater library that holds the rights to the chosen play, and orders the scripts and other relevant books and materials. The producer raises the seed money for the production and hires the needed personnel. Among those hired are: *Stage Director* (or simply *Director*), who is in charge of the artistic elements of the production; the *Stage Manager*, the *Designers* (scenery, lighting, sound, costumes, makeup, hairstyles); the *Props Master*, who is in charge of obtaining hand props (things handled by performers, such as a book, food, or a watch) and taking care of set props which are integral part of the set design (such as furniture, wall decor, lamps); the *Press Agent*, who is in charge of publicity; the *Playbill Editor*, who puts together the printed program; and various *assistants* to these people. For a musical, a few additional important professionals are hired: the *Musical Director*, who is in charge of all musical matters; the *Choreographer*, who creates and directs the dancing; the *Orchestra Director*, who conducts the orchestra or pit band; the *Musicians* who play the various instruments needed; and the *Rehearsal Pianist* who may also be the *Performance Pianist*.<sup>2</sup>

With so many "leaders" in specific aspects of the production, it would not be desirable for all of them to have different interpretations of the show. For this reason, the Stage Director is given the responsibility of controlling the overall artistic impression of the production. The Stage Director, therefore, must have the patience and communicative skills to get everyone working on the play to make it succeed—according to his/her vision. In turn, these

“leaders” must respect the authority of the Stage Director, consulting with him/her before making final decisions on how to carry out their individual responsibilities. Scheduling of rehearsals, especially, is a matter of grave importance and needs to be agreed upon before rehearsals begin to avoid unnecessary conflicts.<sup>3</sup>

The Stage Director schedules tryouts (“auditions”) to select the performers. If the play is a musical, the Choreographer and Musical Director join the Stage Director in evaluating each auditionee. The Stage Director may want to have an Assistant Director, or even a Co-Director, depending on how complicated the play is. This person would also be at the auditions and gives his/her input on whom to cast in what role.

There are instances when roles are pre-cast and no auditions are held. When done, this is usually for lead roles. This sub-form of community theater is referred to as Pro-Am Community Theater. It involves both paid professionals and unpaid amateurs with equal chances for principal roles. They turn up to take part in a production at the discretion of the director.<sup>4</sup> Because of the number of Green Room Players’ “alumni” who have become professional, appearing on Broadway and other noted theaters in the U.S. and abroad, the summer 2004 GRP production of *The King and I* exemplified Pro-Am Community Theater. The roles of Anna, Luntha, and Eliza were given to professionals, but the King was played by an experienced, although not a professional actor.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

Bringing community theater, regardless of type, into the community is an exciting, pleasurable, and fruitful endeavor. However, a symbiotic relationship between the community and the theater company (or companies) is necessary to achieve the optimal gain for both. As Neil Beddow writes in his *Turning Points*, community support for community theater “gives the chance to gain recognition for the arts as an integral and essential part of people’s lives, rather than a peripheral activity for an intellectual or privileged elite.”<sup>6</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This culturally rich area has been home to the Agnir family for close to 30 years.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine A. Novak & Deborah Novak. *Staging Musical Theatre*. Cincinnati, Ohio, Betterway Books, 1996, pages 1 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Elaine A. Novak & Deborah Novak. *Staging Musical Theatre*. Cincinnati, Ohio, Betterway Books, 1996, page 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. An open-content, multi-lingual online encyclopedia. 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Federico Agnir, an experienced actor but not a professional, played this role.

<sup>6</sup> Neil Beddow. *Turning Points, the impact of participation in Community theater*. ed. by Mary Schwarz. Bristol, England: South West Arts. 2001

## References

- Adler, Stella. *The Technique of Acting*. New York: P Bantam Books, 1988.
- Bellman, Willard F. *Scene Design, Stage Lighting, Sound, Costume & Makeup*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983.
- Benedetti, Robert L. *The Director at Work*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985.
- Cohen, Gary P. *The Community Theatre Handbook: A Complete Guide to Organizing and Running a Community Theatre*. London: Heinemann, 2003.
- Dean, Alexander and Lawrence, Carra. *Fundamentals of Play Directing*. 4th ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980.
- Farber, Donald C. *Producing Theater*. Rev. ed. New York: Limelight Editions, 1981.
- Gard, Robert E. and Burley, Gertrude S. *Community Theatre: Idea and Achievement*. Greenwood Publishing Group; reprint ed. 1975.
- Kahan, Stanley. *Introduction to Acting*. 3d ed. Newton, MA: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1991.

Morrow, Lee Alan, and Frank Pike. *Creating Theater*. New York: Vintage Books, 1986.

Stern, Lawrence. *Stage Management*. 3d ed. Newton, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1987.