

Oscar nominee helped to start Civic Theatre

By **Tom Stafford** Staff Writer

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By the mid-1920s, vaudeville was gone, and the Gus Sun theaters that had brought the Marx Brothers, Bob Hope and other luminaries to Springfield were entertaining dust balls.

Enter, stage left, Margaret Wycherly.

In 1941, she would be nominated for an Oscar for best supporting actress for her role as Mother York in the Gary Cooper classic "Sergeant York."

But in 1926, she was making a cameo appearance before the Springfield Federation of Women's Clubs.

She suggested to the ladies of Springfield that a local theater troupe would be a welcome addition to the little theater movement taking hold nationwide.

The one-act plays the club soon undertook as the Folding Theater Players - named for their portable sets - eventually set the stage for the flood of theater productions that will be celebrated at 6:30 p.m. Saturday when the Springfield Civic Theatre gathers in the **Heritage Center** of Clark County to celebrate its 75th anniversary.

A different Columbine

In a history assembled for the group's 50th anniversary and in notes for a 75th anniversary calendar, Civic Theatre veteran Jerry Boswell details the theater's modest start.

Following Wycherly's visit, "Miss Martha Johnson and Mrs. Herbert Reed organized a small group" whose "first offering, 'Columbine,' a one-act play, was presented before an audience of 20 persons," Boswell writes. "Between 1926 and 1928, the Players put on 11 one-act plays."

At the same time, a separate group was at work on full-length plays for the stage of the newly opened Springfield High School.

Against that backdrop, the Federation of Women's Clubs decided to gauge the support for a free-standing company.

"Three lengthy plays were staged," Boswell writes.

On March 13, 1930, "Icebound," directed by the New York actor and director Franklin Raymond, was presented at Springfield High, followed by "Aren't We All."

"After the June, 1930, production of 'The Royal Family' (at the Fairbanks Theater), the audience voted yes to a permanent theater," Boswell writes. "A goal of 1,000 paid subscriptions was soon met, and in September the Springfield Civic Theater was founded."

Luminaries in lights

Although the Civic Theatre did not incorporate until Dec. 14, 1931, a **Heritage Center** display assembled for the Saturday celebration includes a playbill for a Friday, Jan. 30, 1931, staging of "Cock Robin."

Among the stars were Clark County Probate Court Judge Harry Gram; Henry Beckley, the coal and coke dealer and aviation enthusiast, whose name is now attached to Springfield's municipal airport; Margaret Baker, the pioneer businesswoman who helped

to run the Champion Company; and J. Fuller Trump of the Trump-Littleton Insurance Agency, who would become a Civic Theatre staple.

Performing for 32 years in the auditorium at Keifer Junior High, the Civic Theatre also staged performances in the Fairbanks and Ohio theaters, then moved to its own theater fashioned out of a house at 1424 W. Main St. in 1959.

In that 110-seat venue, the Civic Theatre staged productions of "My Fair Lady," "Applause," "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," "Inherit the Wind" and other shows.

Performances also were staged in the Carey Building; on the second floor of what is now the **Heritage Center**.

Over the years, the names Lois Grimes, Martin Levine, Roger Sharp, John McEnaney, George Bauer, Lymon Alexander, Alice Winters (mother of the comedian Jonathan Winters), John Nesbihal, Robert Behr, Chris Moore, Tim Rowe, Shelly Corwin, Nancy Mahoney, Ann Armstrong and others have appeared on playbills.

Boswell calls the period beginning in the 1980s "a gloomy period" for the theater but said the staging of "The Little Foxes" in 1987 helped renew interest in Civic Theatre, which has continued to do periodic performances, most recently in both the basement of the Bushnell Building and in the Clark State Community College Performing Arts **Center's** Turner Studio Theater.

"In 75 years ... we have rehearsed in basements and back rooms; we have painted sets in unheated garages and warehouses; we have worn costumes with safety pins and patches, often with the smell of grease paint," Boswell writes.

Even his descriptions of Cive Theatre rehearsals seem to be the stuff of great theater.

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